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Does Not Compute: Rescuing Academic Credibility in a World of Artificial Intelligence

LEO MCCANN & SIMON SWEENEY

"Pick up blueprints to build droids. Collect all droids. Upgrade and expand your empire". These are the simple instructions displayed on the launch screen of *Star Wars: Droid Tycoon*, a video game inspired by the first *Star Wars* movie. The player's task is to build, sell, and put to work hundreds of Star Wars robots, and watch the intergalactic cash credits roll in.

Millions and then billons of credits are generated. Productivity scores are displayed for each robot, as they generate credits night and day, whether you are playing the game or not. The focus becomes cash accumulation. You start to feel like Tatooine's Tony Montana.

But there's something odd, even unsettling about this nostalgic little game. What exactly are the robots doing? They pootle, whistle, hammer and clank, and out comes the money. But how are they generating the cash? The value-creation process is a black box, entirely obscure. Wealth generation is simply a matter of deploying droids and reaping their outputs. There is no need to concern oneself with process, just focus on the outcome.

A similar sense of emptiness, artificiality and undeserved wins now plagues academic learning. The rise of Generative AI (GenAI), our digital text-generating droids, has dramatically altered the higher education landscape. A HEPI Report suggests 95% of UK undergraduates use GenAI tools, mostly ChatGPT, and 94% do so to assist with assessed work.[1]

GenAI tools often displace student learning by enabling shortcuts that give the impression of learning and writing. The steps traditionally required to demonstrate learning – thinking and writing – can now be bypassed by AI text generation. The student who relies on ChatGPT doesn't need to read original sources or deploy cognitive skills to understand or critically analyze a book, article or theory. They don't have to develop, exercise or respect any academic *craft*. They no longer need to invest much of themselves, their pride and energy into what they create.

Despite its phenomenal encroachment into the HE environment, university responses to address GenAI are confused, unclear and inconsistent. There has been fatalism and acquiescence.[2] Universities, increasingly unsure and defensive about their roles in society, have often embraced GenAI, afraid of appearing outdated, Luddite, and underconfident in defending traditional educational aims and professional norms.

Partly this derives from the sophistication of the technology. Before ChatGPT, bulk text-scanning tools such as Turnitin were used to detect plagiarism. But GenAI makes detection software obsolete. It is almost impossible to prove GenAI use in work submitted for assessment. All we have are suspicions, however strong. Guidelines are developed on 'acceptable use', but these are easily ignored without risk.[3] Some argue that the best response is to allow managed use of AI, bringing it into the classroom partly as a way to explore its limitations. Others argue that GenAI should be actively embraced, as it provides new ways of learning that can be embedded into assessment based on 'real world' tasks.[4]

Such approaches may have value in certain academic areas. But in others, they are unworkable because they carry an intellectual cost that is far too high to bear. Building learning and teaching around GenAI encourages the destruction of the academic craft of reading and writing. GenAI is a pernicious disrupter that often bypasses learning and undermines assessment integrity. It abrogates the need for students to explore the scholarly materials that are the intellectual lifeblood of the university. GenAI provides a précis of human-produced output, often without regard to the provenance of academic knowledge, and depriving authors, researchers and teachers of the satisfaction that their work is being read and understood. GenAI output may be semi-accurate, but is typically inadequate, inauthentic and lifeless.

GenAI has another pernicious impact on the academy. It further consolidates the financialized and instrumental nature of many HE environments, encouraging a mechanistic approach to gaining a degree. GenAI is the perfect companion for a market-driven, end-product focus on the certificate. Chatbots relieve all the tedium, hard work, energy and commitment that genuine study and learning demands. The accumulated subject knowledge, expertise and academic competences that once defined the university is now routinely bypassed and simulated.

We also should not ignore the harm that reliance on GenAI may inflict on students' mental wellbeing. Late capitalism already risks growing alienation and loneliness, a diminishing sense of self-worth. Students are social beings and working collaboratively and creatively is something university should nurture. But if course requirements can be achieved through interaction with chatbots, we risk feeding isolation and poor wellbeing.

Systems Failure

We recognize that GenAI is impossible to ban and we must adapt to its almost ubiquitous presence. Universities have purchased licenses for GenAI software and offer training and guidance. AI tools are good at proofreading, helping with spelling, grammar and style. Grammarly, for exam-

ple, can be an effective teacher. GenAI tools ensure that open assessments read well and are comprehensible. Students with weaker language competence can now submit assignments with a far higher quality of expression than their own capabilities would allow. These assignments will be easier for markers to understand.

Another use of GenAI widely deemed acceptable is for the brainstorming of ideas and getting started on thinking through problems set in class. Help with structuring arguments is also often considered fine. GenAI can competently rewrite what students supply as prompts. Not only does it correct errors, it also can put ideas into a logical and coherent order. Rough and basic input rapidly becomes 'ok-standard' output.

GenAI can summarize entire bodies of research and learning in just a few words. What is Freud's theory of the unconscious? What does Adam Smith say about market economics? Students will often want to be more specific, asking for a précis of a core reading, or a referenced definition of a concept. GenAI can do all this, relieving students of the burden of reading the article and trying to understand it, or finding a suitable definition from a textbook and applying it themselves. Until about a year ago, ChatGPT would frequently generate garbled and fictional references, but its capacity to supply accurate academic references has improved. A diligent student can check generated references against the course reading list, giving the impression of engagement with module sources.

But the obvious problem is that if the assessment process gives credit for what GenAI delivers in respect of good English, structured arguments, précis of key authors' work and discipline-related theory, and accurate referencing, then the assessment processes and outcomes simply lack all integrity. These attributes represent constitutive parts of the assessment for which credit is given. While we routinely expect these competences to be apparent, far too often it is clear to see, yet impossible to prove, that they have been co-opted from GenAI tools and then presented and marked as if they were the work of students, not the black-boxed output of bots.

We often talk about 'autonomous' and 'student-centred' learning. Students using GenAI are barely required to be autonomous, and the extent of their learning is likely superficial or simply unknown. Too often we sense that student work is AI-generated with some post-output tinkering. It hardly manifests as knowledge gained, worked on and demonstrated by the student. Worst of all, we are allowing students to avoid the difficult, but creative and character-building processes of engaging with the standards and aesthetics of academic knowledge and practice. We reward students for acting as deployers and tenders of bots – for becoming the droid tycoons of the university.

AI is also transforming the professional craft of academics. Encouraged by tech companies and much of the political and media landscape, we are expected to embrace widespread AI usage, regardless of discipline. We are asked to 'provide training' on the 'legitimate' use of AI while explaining also the potential pitfalls of AI assistance. Often the assumption is that students need to know how best to use AI in the workplace, with the university as the direct and explicit training ground. This represents the narrowest and most instrumental sense of the purpose and meaning of university, reducing it to 'employability training'.

Skeptics and critics of AI accept certain realities, while being vulnerable to accusations of being anti-progress and resistant to new technologies.[5] GenAI reflects AI's broader evolution and application. It is everywhere a part of life. It tells us what to buy based on what we've bought before, how to get from A to B avoiding traffic snarl-ups, and which flights to catch. For better and for worse, it hums away in our screen-dominated, software-mediated lives. It exists in the most everyday software applications including word processors and search engines, making it harder than ever to avoid or disable. Employers use AI in handling vast data assemblages. In bioengineering, medicine, software development, architecture, mechanics, space technologies, and many more, the technologies serve many useful purposes.

But such everyday and corporate applications of artificial intelligence are entirely at odds with the settings and practices associated with a student at university learning a discipline, gaining knowledge, developing an interpretive craft and undertaking critical analysis appropriate to degree-level expertise. Universities are acutely vulnerable to bot-derived output that simply imitates this expertise.

AI-compromised essays provide extremely attenuated evidence of learning. Their production bypasses academic craft, eliminates the need for proper effort, replaces critical and creative capacity, and denies professional pride in one's work. These attributes are surely more valuable than the ability to give Claude some pertinent prompts.

Integrity must be central to academic learning and assessment. But many students are gaming assessment practices. They learn to use GenAI tools by entering prompts, a supplementary question or two, copying and pasting, checking references against the reading list, then submitting a plausible-looking essay. The results are often generic and dull, but typically enough for a pass, sometimes even a strong pass. Such submissions gain academic credit by meeting 'learning outcomes' in a formulaic tick-box sense. Markers cannot act on their experiential knowledge that much of the content was fraudulently produced. Evidence of knowledge exists on the page in a sense that is literally paper-thin; the knowledge was *generated* by AI, not understood, interpreted and applied by the student. The competence displayed is in asking for, then brushing up, AI-generated output. On intellectual and ethical grounds, this cannot be sufficient.

Students' reasons for wanting to use GenAI can sometimes derived from a lack of confidence in their abilities and identities as readers, researchers, writers and analysts. A focus on creative thinking, analytical skills and the ability to articulate knowledge verbally and in writing should be at the heart of university education. Sadly, much of this has been lost during two decades of marketisation, competitive posturing and the financialization of HE. Grade inflation and the obsession with various metrics have degraded what was once a benchmark of tertiary education quality. In such a context, widespread GenAI usage risks the degeneration of assessment processes into a sludge of managerialist audit. What's too often gone from the essay is spontaneity, originality, intimacy with course texts, and the sense that what's on the page reveals students' sometimes awkward but authentic efforts to grapple with ideas. This is a tragic professional loss for students and academics alike. We cannot ignore its profundity.

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Upgrade and Reboot

Assessment needs a major rethink. Degree programmes need mixed approaches whereby GenAI misuse is made difficult to do and is never rewarded. Closed examinations or *viva voce* tests, interviews, and in-class multiple choice knowledge checks are almost impervious to GenAI. Continuing assessment based on class performance is another option, and one that might help address weak attendance and low engagement. Effective assessment requires adequate resourcing. The integrity of open essays can only be guaranteed if aligned with random *viva voce* testing. This is not a question of practicality, it is whether universities wish to provide adequate resources.

Other assessment methods include 12-hour open book examinations, presentations, videos, podcasts, problem-based group activities, role-playing, reflective statements, and more.[6] We often hear that 'the lecture is dead', or 'essays are redundant'. Such assertions have never been true, but GenAI now directly threatens the essay[7]. The use of *viva voce* could become standard for all programmes, not just doctoral assessment. Claiming that large cohorts make this impractical is simply an excuse. Other jurisdictions use *viva voce*, especially in continental Europe and Australia.[8]

Some students might complain of excessive pressures from examinations or *viva voce*. It is beholden on us to help individuals with mental health and well-being issues, neurodivergence and anxiety, but these cannot be reasons for avoiding difficult tasks. Ironically, here the 'employability' rhetoric may help. Graduates will discover that their careers invariably require performance under pressure. An assessed presentation at university is hardly inappropriate and nor is answering questions about an essay one has supposedly spent three weeks writing.

As HE professionals, we must be bolder in defending academic principles and questioning AI boosterism. Businesses delight in extolling the efficiency savings that flow from investments in AI. But what goes on in corporate offices cannot automatically be a model for what happens in university classrooms. Everyday management of higher education workplaces is increasingly centralized and conformist, but universities ought to be a scholarly community featuring extensive democratic consideration between students and staff about what, how and why we teach.

GenAI damages much of scholarly practice and it undermines the general ethos of higher learning. Rather than rushing headlong towards tolerating the use of black-boxed machine systems, we must refocus on rebuilding and defending careful, detailed scholarship, and valorizing discussion and critique of writings and ideas. We must uphold the broader aim of encouraging human development, collaboration and empathy through creativity, critical thinking, and deep understanding. These ideals define the university. If we allow our practices and values to be defined by the world of AI bots, then everything we do at university will be at risk.

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