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AI AND ASSESSMENT: BEYOND THE CAT AND MOUSE GAME?

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This paper discusses the results of an informal survey of student opinions on the use of AI tools in assessment and the approaches that can be adopted to ensure academic integrity, fairness and validity of assessments. The results of the survey challenge generalised assumptions of students being keen AI users or unanimously viewing detection and penalisation of AI in assessment in a negative way. Instead, it reveals divided views on the usefulness, effectiveness and ethics of AI in education, highlighting the connection between choices of using AI tools and students' broader ethical principles and motivation to learn.

Key words: AI in assessment; academic integrity; student perspectives

Introduction

Three years after the public release of ChatGPT in November 2022, GenAI tools are more advanced and more widely used. The number and variety of chatbots have increased, and beyond text generation, there is a growing number of tools for creating images, sound, videos and formats for specific purposes, for example presentations. Additionally, AI functions are integrated into various platforms, search engines and applications, making AI increasingly pervasive in the digital environment. These developments have continued to affect higher education, heightening the pressure to meaningfully incorporate AI tools into teaching and assessment, amidst tensions around innovation, pedagogical currency and productivity on the one hand, and concerns about academic integrity, ethics, environmental damage and negative cognitive impact on the other.

In the context of academic integrity, AI tools have created new means of plagiarism both among students, and in academic publishing (Pudasaini et al. 2024: 1138; Lannoy 2023: 44). On university courses, as Wiley puts it, AI

instruments "contaminate" the previously persuasive evidence of student learning that pre-AI assessments used to provide (Wiley 2025: 865). ChatGPT and other models have been known to have passed course assessments and admission exams (Pudasaini et al. 2024: 1138), which has led to concerns about graduates' failure to acquire key academic and professional skills (Upsher et al. 2024: 129) and about the loss of value of academic education (Shaw 2025: 5821). In some fields, including highly specialised ones, such as computer science, AI plagiarism and obfuscation carry the risk of enabling learners to successfully pass assessments with limited technological literacy (Sağlam et al. 2024: 297). AI plagiarism is believed to be especially accessible and tempting because of its ease of use, the uncertainty of ethical boundaries regarding authorship, and, as Shaw observes, its "wanting to be used" (Shaw 2025: 5820). The adjustments to curricula and assessments prompted by the advancement of AI tools have been met with mixed responses, from concerns about the deterioration of the quality of higher education courses to enthusiasm about innovation and revising obsolete assessment practices to achieve greater flexibility and authenticity.

In this paper, I provide a brief critical overview of current approaches to tackling AI in assessment in higher education and of some of the assumptions underpinning decision-making in this area. I test these assumptions in a small-scale informal survey of student views and practices of AI use to establish applicability of the suggested solutions for preventing AI-powered plagiarism and nurturing student achievement and academic integrity.

Overview of AI-Aware Approaches to Assessment

Over the past three years universities, researchers and individual tutors have responded to the challenges of AI in assessment mostly by adopting one of the following three loosely defined approaches: designing AI-resilient assessments; regulating, containing, and penalising inappropriate use of AI; and strategically integrating use of AI at particular stages of the assessments to both deter misuse of AI tools and enhance the quality of learning and assessment. These approaches often overlap, as for example AI-resilient assessments, like AI-incorporating ones, may allow for some tasks to be performed using AI tools. Regulation of AI use may also include assessments incorporating AI, as it seeks to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate use. Assessments which integrate AI tools may in turn require some level of regulation to ensure that AI tools are used only for the specific tasks they have been planned for. All three approaches

are imperfect solutions, continually under pressure to adapt to the rapid and unpredictable rate of development of AI functionalities.

AI-resilient assessments include tasks which are considered a challenge for AI tools or in which human agency cannot be circumvented. Commonly cited examples in the literature are tasks incorporating reflection and analysis, personalised tasks related to students' identity or experience, multi-modal assignments, which require output in different formats, and assignments requiring higher-order cognitive skills (Kovari 2024). The key challenge to AI-resilient assessments is the actual strength of their resilience, especially in the face of constantly evolving technology. Individualised and reflective assessments may indeed be less vulnerable to AI use because they require understanding of the private, unique experience of the writer, while GenAI models work by predicting the most likely / common sequences. However, GenAI tools can successfully produce texts within specified discourses, and careful prompt-engineering and role-play can be used to achieve specific, fine-tuned responses that meet the expectations of reflective writing. Multi-modality does provide more creative opportunities and may still require and inspire significant student engagement. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of the mushrooming of AI tools for generating scripts, videos, presentations and podcasts, as well as multi-modal output, and to bear in mind that a variety of formats does not necessarily make an assessment safe from inappropriate AI use. In general, the less tutors are familiar with the capabilities of constantly evolving GenAI tools, the greater the likelihood that they overestimate how AI-proof assessments are.

Regulation, the second approach to AI in assessment, is based on differentiation between appropriate and inappropriate use of GenAI tools in specific contexts; definition of degrees of acceptability (for instance through traffic light systems), and detection and penalties when the rules are broken. The challenges with this approach include difficulties with determining boundaries, communicating rules to diverse cohorts of staff and students, and gathering solid evidence in suspected violations. According to a study by Corbin et al., both teachers and students struggle with interpreting AI policies on assessment, and students tend to develop their own, unique ethical frameworks of acceptability, based on analogies or perceived judgement of the teacher's attitude to AI, rather than on the actual policies or feedback (Corbin et al. 2025b: 9). Difficulties are compounded by the unreliability and limited availability of AI detection tools. According to Pudasaini et al., detection tools tend to always be "one step behind," especially due to obfuscation software, and their unreliability is likely to be

exacerbated with the development of more advanced LLMs (Pudasaini et al. 2024: 1138 – 1139). Another concern with the detection and penalty route is that it may lead to "over-policing student work and presuming a propensity to cheat", which can negatively impact the relationship between students and teachers (Upsher et al. 2024: 132).

A more effective strategy for combatting AI-powered plagiarism is believed to be education about AI tools and academic integrity. Raising awareness of AI policies and the ethical use of AI are key in this process (Pudasaini et al. 2024: 1162; Kovari 2024). In addition, allowing students to evaluate the performance of AI tools and their shortcomings when completing complex academic tasks has been shown to serve as a persuasive deterrent against inappropriate use of AI (Niekerk et al. 2025: 10).

The third approach to AI and assessment suggests that integrating AI tools into stages of the completion of assignments is an effective countermeasure to AI plagiarism because it brings it out into the open and allows for its strategic use. According to Corbin et al., building AI tools into the structure of an assignment would remove the ambiguity around acceptability (Corbin et al. 2025b: 10). Showing students how to productively use AI tools for their learning could shift the focus away from cheating, and thresholds of admissible AI content could provide clear guidelines on appropriate use (Pudasaini et al. 2024: 1162). However, such thresholds may be rather mechanical and not really indicative of the amount of student engagement in a task. Rules on selective application of AI tools could be confusing for students and difficult to enforce by staff.

The incorporation of AI tools into assessments is usually justified not as a mere antiplagiarism measure, but as having intrinsic value, as it allows students to perform more demanding tasks and demonstrate more advanced and relevant skills. AI tools are believed to facilitate authentic assessments: complex tasks, set in wider societal context, containing innovative and transformative elements, and requiring higher-order skills (Powell, Forsyth 2024: 119). Authentic assessments are resilient to AI tools in the sense that they are impossible to complete with AI tools alone, but AI tools can have a supportive role by providing students with individual guidance and aiding them in making and justifying their own decisions (Powell, Forsyth 2024: 120). Tasks focusing on lower-order skills, which are easily performed by AI, do not usually qualify as authentic assessments, but can be delegated to AI as part of a complex authentic task, so that students can instead focus on higher-order skills such as interpersonal communication, meta-cognitive skills or decision-making (Upsher et al. 2024: 130).

AI tools could be productively integrated at various stages of the completion of an assignment: research, selection and evaluation of sources (Powell, Forsyth 2024: 123); identifying appropriate search words and synthesising information from sources in preparation for writing a literature review (Smith, Francis 2024: 143 – 145); brainstorming ideas and drafting a paper (Smith, Francis 2024: 147); obtaining feedback on the completed assignment (Powell, Forsyth 2024: 126). To avoid blurring the line between human and AI output and the uncritical use of AI tools, this approach suggests incorporating evaluation of the gains and losses of AI use. Strategic and reflective incorporation of AI tools in assessment is said to require a shift of focus from the final product to the process of learning (Powell, Forsyth 2024: 126), for example through processfolios containing both formative submissions and reflection on the learning journey (Upsher et al. 2024: 136).

Issues arising with the incorporation approach are honesty of declared use and failure to test the command of more basic skills, which have been delegated to AI tools. Another key concern is whether AI use will be limited to the purposes specified in assignment briefs or whether this would be a "slippery slope" to plagiarism (Shaw 2025: 5820). While an oral component could be used to ensure the robustness of the assessment (Powell, Forsyth 2024: 122), it may be exclusive for students with social anxiety (Upsher et al. 2024: 131).

A significant benefit of including AI in assessments, and respectively in the learning process, is that it would teach effective use in preparation for the requirements of the labour market, creating "AI-ready professionals" (Upsher et al. 2024: 129). This task presents a significant challenge for university degrees which are not directly linked to particular professions. The application of AI tools in work environments tends to be industry-specific, in many cases still at an experimental stage, and longer-term implications especially in the field of the Humanities are hard to predict.

All the approaches above have their strengths but are also fraught with challenges and compromises on what is being tested. Corbin et al. frame the challenging nature of the issue of AI and assessment as a "wicked problem": a problem that evades a fixed consensus formulation and has no right / wrong answer, only better or worse responses (Corbin et al. 2025a: 2; 5). For this reason, rather than chasing "a silver bullet" solution, they recommend building adaptive capacity and constant readjustment in response to dynamic and specific local contexts.

Assumptions about AI and Assessment

Decisions about which of the above-mentioned routes to take when developing AI-aware assessments are often underpinned by certain assumptions, often in favour of integration of AI tools:

(1) AI tools are available, accessible, they are "here to stay" (Ng 2025: 1697). Students will use them, whether they are allowed to or not, so it is wiser to accommodate this use.

(2) Resisting AI in education is old-fashioned and retrograde, embracing it is progressive, innovative and forward-looking.

(3) Using detection and prohibition is a cat and mouse game which pits tutors against students and damages trust between them.

In order to examine these assumptions and explore appropriate solutions to assessment, it is important to invite students into the conversation, especially where assumptions are made on their behalf. For this purpose, I decided to conduct an informal online survey on students' existing practices of using AI and their opinions on the possibilities of regulating and integrating AI tools in assessments. The survey enriches the existing critical discussion by demonstrating the diversity in students' perspectives on AI and reveals a perhaps surprising negative strand in some opinions, which challenge the assumptions above and add to the complexity of making judgements about assessment.

Survey on Student Perspectives of AI and Academic Integrity

The overall intention of the survey was to gain an insider view of how students use AI tools, what their motives are, how ethical they find the use of these tools at various stages of assignments in which AI tools are not permissible, and whether and how AI tools can be integrated while keeping assessments valid and fair. On a practical level, understanding the students' opinions and taking them into consideration when adapting assignments would enhance face validity. Beyond that, however, the survey was not simply diagnostic but intended to serve as a step towards involving students in an open dialogue, which in itself can undermine the cat and mouse opposition and contribute to fostering academic integrity.

The study was designed as an informal anonymous online questionnaire, which was shared with approximately 150 students of Sofia University's English Philology BA degree in November 2025. Participation was completely voluntary and anonymous, with no incentives, and was not connected to any specific course or assignment in order to provide students with maximum freedom of choice and safety. There were 32 self-selected

respondents, out of whom 11 attended follow-up focus group discussions. Certainly, given the size of the entire cohort of students invited to contribute, the number of participants in the survey and focus group discussions is of limited statistical value. However, lower participation rates are understandable with a voluntary survey on sensitive issues which students are not often consulted about. The fact that the survey was unrelated to any specific assessment meant that participation added to students' workload and the self-selected cohort willingly made an effort to take part. This is an indication of the participants' intrinsic motivation, which was confirmed during the focus group discussions: the students who elected to participate are deeply invested in the topic, have expressed strong views on it, and demonstrate a sense of collective responsibility around issues of academic integrity, rather than a preference for navigating them individually. So, while the self-selection process and the limited number of contributors may have led to sample bias, it has also ensured well thought-through critical contributions related to deeper personal and communal values.

Most of the questions in the survey addressed use of AI in assessments in which it is prohibited, i.e. they belong to the detection and regulation approach, as this is still the most common type of assessment in the participants' local context. To protect students from feeling directly targeted and make them comfortable providing answers, most questions did not address the respondents' own use of AI, but rather their observations of its prevalence among the students on their degree course as a whole. This inevitably makes the results impressionistic and subjective. On the other hand, direct measurement of prohibited AI is impossible. The data from this survey may not be numerically precise but are nonetheless indicative of existing trends and attitudes among students. Students were directly asked about their own opinion in questions about the ethics of use of AI and the appropriateness of measures of preventing AI-enabled plagiarism. The majority of the questions were multiple-choice, and the pre-set answers, especially on measures for tackling AI-powered plagiarism or on the acceptability of using AI at specific stages of an assessment, were derived from the research on the three approaches on AI in assessment summarised above.

Regarding prevalence of the use of AI among students, opinions varied significantly, with 37.5% of respondents believing more than half of students use AI in assessments which prohibit AI use, and another 34.4% estimating the proportion of AI users at less than half. Only 12.5% of participants in the survey believed that prohibited AI use is limited to isolated cases. These results suggest that a significant number of students are believed to be using AI tools in assessments that prohibit them.

In answer to the question about what type of assignments respondents think AI tools are used in, predictably the majority of respondents agreed that inappropriate use of AI is most common in homework tasks, both in continuous assessment and research papers. Regarding in-person exams there was some division in opinions, with about a third of respondents claiming use of AI is not common in those cases, versus approximately two-thirds agreeing that it is fairly common or very common. Importantly, with in-person exams, participants report that use of AI in tasks requiring regurgitation of factual information is as common as in analytical tasks. This goes against claims in the literature that assignments requiring higher-order skills are less vulnerable to AI tools and should serve as a reminder that analytical questions do not necessarily make an assessment AI-resilient.

In order to elicit a granular response about students' views of the ethics of using AI in assignments that prohibit it, the ethics question specified use at different stages of the assignment: from understanding the brief, through brainstorming and planning to producing partial or full answers. Logically, and reassuringly, a strong majority of respondents find the use of AI unethical where there is less to no human agency involved, for example for generating a full draft for editing (considered unethical by 71.88% of respondents) or a final draft to be submitted with minimal editing (unethical according to 81% of respondents). There seems to be more hesitation regarding understanding the brief, generating ideas or polishing the students' own work, with more respondents finding AI aid not particularly problematic or justifiable at these stages. For example, with brainstorming, only 25% of respondents found use of AI unethical, while 31.25% found it completely ethical; and the remaining approximately 40% selected the two more nuanced answers: "not entirely ethical, but not a big deal either" and "not ethical, but justifiable if it earns you a good mark". These responses are important as they indicate that simply prohibiting the use of AI tools for all stages of the assignment does not convince students that AI use is unethical, nor is prohibition necessarily a deterrent if AI use may result in a higher mark. The examples of AI use which a relatively large number of respondents selected as less ethically problematic are consistent with the stages at which researchers favouring integration recommend that AI tools can be productively incorporated (e.g. Powell, Forsyth 2024: 123; Smith, Francis 2024: 143 – 147). Respondents' flexibility in these cases suggests that there may be a case for adopting AI tools. At the same time, ethical considerations need to be combined with pedagogical reasoning, and students need to be invited to examine how innocuous AI-aided practices are

at any stage of an assignment and consider whether they may lead to loss of creativity or organisational skills.

Another question aimed to identify students' specific concerns about the illicit AI use in assessments. Results showed that overall between half and two-thirds of respondents share the key concerns about cognitive impact, credibility of qualifications, and environmental effects. The most serious concern, selected by 71.9 % of respondents, was AI's negative effect on cognitive skills (Niekerk et al. 2025: 1; Shaw 2025: 5821), which I summarised by the slang word "brain rot": a term common in the target group's culture and which was selected as Oxford Word of the Year for 2024 (Brain Rot 2024). Respondents were also concerned about AI impacts such as loss of expertise (59.5%) and erosion of the value of their degrees (62.5%), fairness (40.6%); and environmental damage (59.4%), consistent with issues identified in scholarly work (Kovari 2024; Upsher et al. 2024: 129; Moorhouse 2024: 387 – 388).

These high levels of concern cohere with the arguments of respondents who object not only to unauthorised use of AI, but to legitimising its use in future assessments. When asked about whether AI should be incorporated in assessment instead of prohibited, a surprisingly high percentage of participants, i.e. 51.3%, were against, and another 31.3% were undecided. Only 15.5 % of respondents were in favour of integration. The answers to the follow-up open-ended question on why AI tools should not be allowed in assessments in the future echoed students' concerns about unauthorised use of AI cited earlier, for example:

> AI is horrible to the environment and our brains;
>
> 1) environmental concerns with all AI use 2) erodes students' ability to employ critical thinking skills
>
> Even though there could be creative ways to integrate AI into the study process, this has nothing to do with how dangerous to the environment it is.

Another concern was that GenAI tools use was unethical and unfair to "us students who are choosing to do our degrees because of genuine interest in our field". Students also disapproved of AI due to copyright issues ("AI is a huge plagiarism machine that is built on the nonconsensual integration of the work of others") and being destructive to human creative capacities ("it is a death to creativity").

Students' negative perceptions of AI tools as expressed above make important corrections to the assumptions outlined earlier. While it may be true that the use of AI tools is common, if respondents' estimates about prevalence in the first question are correct, it is also evident that the mere existence of AI tools does not mean that all students are willing to use them.

In fact, over half of respondents were against integration in assessment, and about a quarter of students found any use of AI unethical. Moreover, regarding the assumption about the inherent progressiveness of AI use, respondents' objections are not symptomatic of old-fashioned nostalgia or general resistance to change, but legitimate current concerns about environmental safety, human creativity and literacy – concerns which are usually acknowledged in emerging research but are often overridden by effectiveness and pedagogical usefulness.

Given that a significant proportion of respondents do not support integration of AI tools, the question about the measures that could be taken to make AI-incorporating assessments valid and fair logically received fewer responses (19 out of 32). Out of those nineteen who provided an answer, 78.9% supported the inclusion of an oral component to prove understanding and authorship of the assignment, 68.4% selected clear rules about acceptability, 52.6% approved the inclusion of reflection on the usefulness of AI tools, and 57.9% – the detailed declaration of AI use. These answers can be helpful in future decisions when reforming assessments, bearing in mind that the most popular method, the oral component, is also the one that most directly investigates the use of AI tools, which suggests respondents' perceived need for convincing proof of human authorship.

Considering the potential benefits of integrating AI tools (a question which for similar reasons was answered only by 15 participants), most respondents agreed that this would provide an opportunity to learn how to use AI effectively (66.7%). Other popular answers included increased authenticity (46.7%), and higher complexity of the task (53.3%). These answers reveal the division in opinions among students on the matter of whether and how AI tools can be integrated in assessment and highlight a need for education on productive AI use. The range of opinions – from integration for the sake of mastering AI tools to vocal opposition to any use of AI – presents significant challenges for educators, as these opposing views seem to require contradictory measures.

The final question I have selected for analysis tests students' tolerance of measures to prevent unauthorised use of AI, as such employment of AI tools, as discovered through earlier questions, is seen as unethical in at least some of its dimensions as well as causing a variety of concerns. The most popular technique for enforcing regulation (similar to the responses about integration) was to use oral exams in suspected cases of AI plagiarism (56.3%). Educational measures such as persuasive reasons not to use AI and clearer instructions of permissibility were supported by a little over 40% of students, a result which is consistent with Kovari's claim about the

effectiveness of academic integrity campaigns (Kovari 2024). Interestingly, some of the more restrictive measures were also approved by some students. For example, a little over 40% were in favour of stricter invigilation during exams and use of AI detection tools, and a 37.5% support stricter or more consistent penalties for inappropriate AI use. Although the respondents favouring stricter control and penalties are a minority, they still represent a non-negligible proportion of respondents. Their opinions undermine the third assumption that students necessarily see themselves as victims in a cat and mouse game and demonstrate that some students are invested in the process of maintaining good academic practices even through unpopular measures.

Conclusion

The results from my informal online study on student views about use of AI in assessment challenge common assumptions about the inevitability of AI use by students, its innate progressivism and innovativeness, and its prohibition and control being perceived by students entirely negatively. While these assumptions may hold true for some students, respondents' answers have revealed a much greater range of views, including a number of students opposed to both unauthorised use of AI in violation of existing rules and future integration for a variety of reasons (environmental damage, cognitive and creative decline, erosion of professionalism and institutional credibility, equity).

Students support a variety of measures for tackling AI-related plagiarism, including more restrictive measures, while some participants also support integrating AI into assessments and training for effective use. While participants represent an overall rather small and possibly biased sample, the outcomes of the survey demonstrate significantly polarised opinions which would need to be considered and addressed regardless of numbers. This division in opinions further complicates the "wicked problem" of AI in assessment, as defined by Corbin et al., and is also consistent with one more "wicked problem" characteristic: that it is symptomatic of other issues (Corbin et al. 2025a: 9). The arguments provided by students on how to approach AI in assessment are indicative of other differences in attitudes not necessarily related to AI, but rather to students' motivation for their studies, their engagement with broader social and environmental issues, their interest in their subject and their understanding of the ethics of personal achievement and collective responsibility. Solutions to the AI in assessment conundrum need to address explicitly the individual challenges, viewpoints and motivations of students and aim to foster shared values of belonging to an academic culture that has

academic integrity and achievement at its heart, with firm boundaries in terms of acceptable academic behaviour, but which is open and inclusive to various goals, skills and learning styles.

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