Are we assessing learning - or just grading production?

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UNIwise

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"From our students' point of view, assessment always defines the actual curriculum."
- Paul Ramsden

Is it possible that our assessments are teaching students not to learn? This provocative question has been on my mind since I revisited the quote above. It echoes the wisdom of scholar John Biggs: to achieve deep learning, we must first define clear learning outcomes, then design assessments that align with those outcomes, and only after that plan our teaching methods. In other words, students focus on what we assess – and if our assessments prize memorisation and rote production, that's what students will put their effort into, often at the expense of real understanding.

Wohnke research on AI perception by students

Recent research by Wonkhe titled "Trained to stop learning: how students are experiencing assessment and learning in an age of AI" underscores how urgent this alignment issue has become. The study finds that today's assessment practices frequently reward students for producing work, not for demonstrating genuine understanding, and that the rise of generative AI has exposed and accelerated this flaw.

Many students admitted that they have turned in assignments they themselves could not fully explain, in fact, 38% of students surveyed said they had submitted work they didn't truly understand. And nearly half expressed doubts that their grades reflect their actual knowledge.

These problems predate AI, but the advent of tools like ChatGPT has made it much easier to generate passable essays or solutions without learning, widening that gap between what students hand in and what they really know. If a university assessment can be aced by simply prompting an AI – producing something that looks correct – then as one student in the study put it, the institution has effectively "trained [students] to stop learning" in order to succeed.

Design matters over policy

The core insight from the Wonkhe research is crystal clear: it's the design of assessments – even more than any AI usage policy, that determines whether students use AI as a crutch to bypass learning or as a tool to deepen it. When students anticipate a follow-up or "accountability moment" requiring them to personally demonstrate understanding (for example, an oral exam, presentation, or in-class discussion about their work), they tend to use AI in active, learning-oriented ways – to check their reasoning, generate test questions or explore alternative approaches. Conversely, when assessments are just a one-off product drop-off with no subsequent questioning, students are more likely to use AI on "autopilot", letting the technology do the work while they disengage.

In short, if we only ask students to submit a polished artefact, we shouldn't be surprised when they focus on polishing the artefact (by any means necessary) rather than mastering the material.

Banning is not the solution

It's also clear that simply banning AI or making students sign honor pledges is not a sustainable solution. One-size-fits-all AI policies, often tacked onto courses in a hurry, have left students more confused than guided. The Wonkhe report found that universities' current rules on AI are frequently vague, inconsistent, or unenforceable, varying from class to class and usually just telling students "do your own work" without clarifying details. Such blanket declarations tend to penalise the most honest students while the real abusers can work around them.

Students who earnestly avoid using any AI (due to fear of breaking ambiguous rules) sometimes end up with worse outcomes than peers who covertly use these tools to get ahead. Meanwhile, a striking gender gap has emerged: women students are over 20 percentage points less likely than men to use AI for coursework, and many non-users (three-quarters of whom are female) carry anxiety about falling behind in an "AI era" without actually using the technology. Additionally, many disabled students (e.g. those with dyslexia or ADHD) report that AI-based tools are the best learning support they've ever had, often compensating for inadequate official accommodations from their institutions. Blanket prohibitions on AI could inadvertently take away a crucial support from students who genuinely need it to level the playing field.

Recommendations from the Wonkhe study

So how should higher education respond? How can we realign assessment with learning in an age of AI? Below are four key strategies, drawn from the Wonkhe study's recommendations – that can help reshape assessment for the better:

1. **Design Assessments for understanding, not just Output**

Ask ourselves at the design stage: "How would a student prove to us that they truly understand this material, not just produce something that looks correct?" In practice, this means crafting assessment formats that require students to demonstrate their reasoning or skills, rather than only submitting a polished essay or report. For example, we can introduce verification moments - brief oral exams, in-person discussions, or reflective presentations attached to written submissions - so that students know they may be called upon to discuss their work.

This doesn't mean every assignment turns into a full viva voce; even a short conversation or a structured Q&A about their submission can meaningfully change student behavior. Such built-in checkpoints make it much harder for someone to rely on AI (or any shortcut) without learning, because they will eventually have to explain their thinking. The goal is not "gotcha" surveillance, but to send a clear signal that understanding matters. When students see that grappling with the material is what's ultimately tested and rewarded, they are more likely to engage deeply from the start.

2. **Clarify Guidance on AI - Move Beyond Blanket Bans**

Universities should replace broad, fear-driven AI bans and honor pledges with clear, practical guidance that recognises the different ways AI can be used in learning. Students need to know precisely what is allowed or encouraged at each stage of their work, for instance, using AI to brainstorm ideas or check grammar might be fine, while using it to generate entire essays is not. Effective policies will likely be tailored to each discipline and assignment type. After all, the role of AI in a coding project is different from its role in a history essay or a design portfolio. Course teams should collaborate on consistent messaging so that students don't get mixed signals from different lecturers.

The aim is to create a shared understanding: faculty and students both know when using AI is a helpful learning aid and when it crosses into academic misconduct. By engaging students in these conversations (even letting them help shape sensible AI use policies), we treat them not as adversaries to be policed, but as partners in navigating how new tools can be used ethically to support learning.

3. **Support Equity and Inclusion in an AI-Enhanced Environment**

As we integrate AI considerations into assessment, it's crucial to keep equity at the forefront. Unclear policies have already been shown to impose disproportionate burdens on diligent rule-followers, often the most conscientious students. Moving forward, we must ensure that any approach to AI in assessment doesn't worsen existing inequalities. For example, if certain forms of AI use are beneficial for learning (like using AI for quick feedback or accessibility), those should be openly permitted and even facilitated for all students so that nervous rule-abiders aren't left at a disadvantage.

We should also formally recognise and accommodate the use of AI as assistive technology: if a text-to-speech or grammar-suggestion AI significantly helps a dyslexic student, our platform and policies should integrate that support rather than force it underground. Furthermore, because not all students have equal access to cutting-edge AI tools (often the best AI tools cost money or require technical savvy), universities might consider providing institutionally-supported AI resources. This would prevent a socio-economic access gap, ensuring that students who can't afford premium AI apps aren't penalised. In short, equitable assessment in the age of AI means meeting students where they are, providing clarity, support, and tools so that every student can demonstrate their learning under fair conditions.

4. **Improve Feedback Loops and Foster Peer Learning**

One striking insight from the research is that many students turn to AI when human feedback and interaction are missing. If feedback on assignments arrives too late, after the next assignment has already begun, students naturally see each task as an isolated hurdle, not part of a learning journey. By ensuring feedback is timely and constructive, we re-establish assessment as a learning process, not just a judgement. Feedback should help students understand how to think better and apply concepts, not merely justify a grade. Alongside improving educator-to-student feedback, institutions should leverage the power of peer learning.

Every instance of genuine, lasting learning described by students in the Wonkhe study involved other people, explaining ideas to a classmate, working through problems in groups, or comparing approaches. These peer interactions build understanding and confidence, and interestingly, students who feel a strong sense of belonging in their course report using AI much less for shortcuts.

Universities can capitalise on this by making peer-assisted learning a more formalised part of courses, for example, through structured peer review sessions, study groups, or discussion-based tasks. Not only does this distribute know-how and support more evenly across the student body, it also creates a community where students hold each other accountable and are motivated to learn for real, not just tick boxes.

Looking ahead: Aligning technology with pedagogy

Implementing these changes will require not just willpower and pedagogy, but also smart use of technology. Modern digital assessment platforms like WISEflow can help universities turn these principles into practice at scale.

How? By providing flexible orchestration of varied assessment formats and stages within a single, easy-to-use system. For example, WISEflow allows educators to design an assessment journey that might include a written assignment and a follow-up oral exam or presentation, all coordinated within one platform. Such built-in versatility makes it simpler to introduce those crucial verification moments and ensure they happen smoothly – scheduling a brief viva or a peer-review step becomes a natural part of the workflow, not a logistical headache.

The platform also supports a wide range of assessment types (from essays and quizzes to portfolios and live examinations), which means courses can choose formats that best fit their learning outcomes and disciplinary context. Crucially, clear instructions and policies can be embedded into each assessment flow on the platform, ensuring students see consistent, stage-specific guidance on AI use and academic integrity right alongside their assignment details.

Being an end-to-end digital exam system, WISEflow can further streamline feedback and support processes – markers can provide feedback faster in-platform, and second-marking or moderation is managed seamlessly, helping get comments back to students before the next assessment starts.

It also supports accommodations and alternative exam arrangements, which is vital for inclusion. In addition, a well-designed platform can facilitate certain types of peer interaction in assessments, whether that's through group submission workflows, peer assessment modules, or simply by freeing up instructor time (through efficient admin) to enable more mentorship and discussion sessions around assessment tasks.

Alignment: assess understanding over output

In essence, the right technology partner can free educators to focus on what really matters – defining and fostering the learning that assessments should measure. The Wonkhe report is a timely reminder that we must realign our assessment practices with our educational values. If we truly believe, as Biggs did, that outcomes, assessment, and teaching must be aligned, and if we agree with Ramsden's adage that assessment shapes the student experience, then we have work to do. We need to design assessments that value understanding over mere output, guide students in the proper use of new tools like AI, ensure fairness and support for all learners, and treat assessment as an integral part of the learning process. By doing so – and by leveraging platforms capable of orchestrating more authentic, varied forms of assessment – we can turn the challenge of AI into an opportunity to reaffirm what "learning" truly means in the curriculum. The result can be a future where technology is harnessed in service of deeper learning, and where students succeed by learning rather than by stopping their learning.

References

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