



Beyond Punishment: Preparing Students for an AI Future

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Opinion

The current debate about whether students who use AI to cheat should be punished is unhelpful. It oversimplifies a complex issue by focusing on blame rather than why students are turning to AI and how education should respond. Three broader considerations are important.

First, AI is not a temporary phenomenon [1-3]. Governments and companies increasingly regard it as a strategic capability with implications for economic competitiveness, national security, technological sovereignty, and international influence [4-6]. Students are therefore entering a world in which AI will be deeply embedded in workplaces, governments, research, consultancy, and other forms of professional life [7,8]. The educational question should not simply be how to prevent students from using AI, but how to prepare them to use it critically and effectively.

Second, universities themselves are actively competing in the AI landscape [9,10]. They invest in AI research, establish new programmes and institutes, form partnerships with technology companies, and promote the use of AI across teaching, research, administration, and student services. Yet when students adopt the same technologies, universities have frequently approached their use through the lens of academic integrity, framing it as potential academic misconduct and responding with restrictive rules and sanctions [11-13]. This creates an obvious tension. If universities are participating in the AI race themselves, they need to be more honest about what that means for students. Rather than simply policing AI use, they should distinguish between uses that support meaningful learning and those that undermine it, while teaching students how to navigate a world in which AI will be unavoidable.

Third, the debate needs to be considered alongside the broader reality of how intellectual and professional work is produced. Ghostwriting, research assistance, editorial support, and other forms of delegated or assisted labour are common across professional and academic life [14,15]. None of this makes

every use of AI legitimate, and important questions remain about authorship, originality, disclosure, and academic integrity. But it does expose a potential double standard when universities condemn students for using AI while treating other forms of assisted intellectual labour as normal professional practice. The important distinction, therefore, is not simply whether assistance was used, but how it was used, what the individual contributed, whether disclosure was required, and whether the final work genuinely reflects the person's understanding and judgement [16-19]. If universities accept that academic and professional work can involve various forms of assistance, including AI, they should establish clear norms for responsible use rather than pretending that meaningful intellectual work has always been produced entirely by individuals working alone.

Universities should consequently devote less attention to determining the appropriate sanctions for students who use AI and more to education and training [20-22]. Students need to understand both its benefits and its risks: inaccurate or fabricated information, bias, overreliance, privacy concerns, loss of critical thinking, and the temptation to outsource intellectual work rather than engage with it. They also need to know when AI assistance becomes inappropriate and when disclosure or attribution is required.

A useful approach would therefore be to adopt a risk-based framework that distinguishes between high-, medium-, and low-risk uses of AI [23-25]. High-risk uses could include generating an entire assignment or submitting AI-produced work without understanding or verifying it. Medium-risk uses might include structuring ideas, improving a draft, explaining difficult concepts, or supporting research, provided the student remains actively engaged and responsible for the final work. Low-risk uses might include brainstorming, checking grammar, generating revision questions, or exploring alternative approaches to a problem. Such a framework would shift the discussion away from the simplistic question of whether a student has used AI at all. The more important questions become: What was the AI used for? How

much responsibility did the student retain? What risks did the use create? And what did the student learn from the process?

Students' willingness to experiment with AI should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of a willingness to cheat. They are studying in a rapidly changing technological environment, and their use of AI is partly a response to that reality. Universities should treat them not simply as potential offenders to be policed, but as future professionals who need to understand when and how to use these technologies responsibly.

The more productive way to approach the issue is therefore as a question of preparedness for the future [26,27]. Students will graduate into workplaces in which AI is increasingly common. They will need to know when to use it, when not to use it, how to evaluate its output, and how to remain accountable for decisions made with its assistance.

The objective should not be to produce graduates who have never used AI. It should be to produce graduates who understand its capabilities and limitations well enough to use it responsibly. Ultimately, the goal should be AI literacy rather than AI prohibition.

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