

I caught my students using AI to cheat in an exam - here's what universities must do to stamp this out

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The rapid spread of generative AI tools has exposed deep vulnerabilities in conventional methods of academic assessment. This challenge came into sharp focus for me when I found evidence of widespread unauthorized use of artificial intelligence in an examination for my course on welfare economics and social-choice theory at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, last semester.

Some students were reluctant to return to the classroom after a campus shooting earlier in the academic year, so I administered the midterm test as a take-home exam for the first time in nearly two decades of teaching the course. Although it was more demanding than previous exams, the average score was 96%, far above the course's historical range of roughly 65–80%. Suspecting AI-enabled

cheating, I held the final test of the course as an in-person, closed-book examination. The average score plummeted to 48.6%. Furthermore, several students either dropped the course or did not sit the final exam.



Why universities need to radically rethink exams in the age of AI

The shocking aspect of this episode was not that cheating seems to have occurred on the take-home exam, but how prevalent it appeared to be. Universities have struggled to respond adequately to this challenge. But they cannot afford to ignore it — the very credibility of learning and assessment is at stake.

Two things require immediate attention: restoring a culture of academic integrity and adapting student learning and assessment methods for the age of AI.

The prevalence of cheating at universities is sustained, at least in part, by the reluctance of academic leaders to confront it decisively. When university leaders fail to defend academic integrity unequivocally, they help to create a culture in which cheating is normalized. My own experience and the countless messages I have

received from faculty members at other institutions suggest that administrators often respond to evidence of extensive cheating with hesitation or denial. In some cases, this seems to stem from a desire to protect the institution's reputation and 'market value'. Yet, it misunderstands the factors that ultimately give a university its standing: high standards, a strong work ethic and genuine academic excellence.



AI can supercharge inequality — unless the public learns to control it One way to ensure rigorous academic standards is to strengthen faculty representation on university governing bodies so that academic values and principles become more firmly embedded in institutional decision-making. This could involve creating dedicated academic committees, led by faculty members and responsible for overseeing key academic priorities, with a formal role in informing and participating in governing-body meetings. Likewise, the emphasis many university presidents place on fundraising should be matched by an equally strong commitment to defending core academic standards. In an environment where academic integrity is consistently upheld, academic-conduct committees are more likely

to enforce appropriate consequences, making cheating less common.

Political leaders, too, have a responsibility to develop clear regulatory frameworks for AI and the broader tech industry. Measures aimed at improving the well-being of young learners, such as restrictions on smartphone use among children and adolescents, are being debated in many countries. A serious discussion about appropriate safeguards at the university level must begin, too. These could include measures such as guaranteed equitable access to AI tools for all students so that everyone can learn how to use them and legislation that strengthens institutions' ability to enforce academic-integrity rules. If the status quo persists, higher education risks producing graduates who have mastered the use of AI tools but not the critical thinking that universities are meant to cultivate. That would be a profound betrayal of what society should expect from universities.



AI is transforming the economy — understanding its impact requires both data and imagination The many existing proposals for rethinking teaching and assessment in the age of AI also deserve

serious consideration. These include a return to oral examinations, properly supervised in-person exams, greater use of continuous assessment and conversation-based, Socratic-style evaluations. None of these approaches offers a panacea, but all merit careful exploration as universities adapt to a new technological reality.

Right now, many institutions are struggling to develop in-house guidelines for the appropriate use of AI. These efforts are important, but a fragmented approach is unlikely to succeed. A broader, coordinated effort is needed to evaluate solutions and establish best practices. Rather than letting each institution work in isolation, governments, universities and the private sector should collaborate on developing common frameworks. Organizations such as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the US National Science Foundation, the European Research Council, national education ministries and the United Nations cultural organization UNESCO could convene expert panels and lead this global conversation.

It is essential that AI is harnessed in ways that enhance, rather than undermine, learning and assessment. That should be the central goal. Equally important, however, is the need to reaffirm the values of hard work and integrity. Without them, no educational system can sustain excellence for long.

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