AI & SOCIETY
https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-025-02779-9

CURMUDGEON CORNER

How to value a human voice? Why we need to re-think university assessments in the age of AI

Niall Docherty[1]

One of the chief concerns surrounding AI in university settings pertains to academic integrity. Namely, *generative AI* based on large language models (LLM) is said to make it easier for students to cheat in their written assessments. ChatGPT, Gemini, and the like, can churn out essays of a passable standard when given even the most idiosyncratic of prompts; offer Will Hunting-esque mathematical solutions to formerly devious problems; write tolerable code; create architectural drawings; render molecular structures; analyze policy documents; create poems; critique corporate texts; decipher legalese; and so on, and so on. However, rather than admonish the supposed moral degeneracy of our students for doing so, we ought to be questioning why students are turning to AI to pass their assessments in the first place. This involves facing up to the educational and instrumental purposes we presently grant universities and how we articulate the value of our degree programs to those in our charge.

The use of AI in university assessments means that quality assurance across the disciplinary spectrum is under threat. For degrees that result in a specific professional accreditation, such as medicine or engineering, the requirement to hold the fort is clear. We need doctors who know their proverbial behinds from their elbows; bridges that don't collapse. You'd like to think that students themselves knowing and believing this could be a key defense against the future degradation of such fields. Here, you can imagine how a students' use of AI could be tempered with the insight that the continued development, and survival, of their hoped-for professions rely upon them as its human bearers—for now at least. The value of assessments for these disciplines, then, and the case for students' doing the work and passing them of their own volition, can therefore be individually incentivized through appeals to societal and professional values.

✉ Niall Docherty
n.docherty@sheffield.ac.uk

[1] University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

However, if the case against the use of AI in the aforementioned disciplinary spheres can be easily identified and strongly made, the same can't be said for those disciplines without direct, explicit links to professional contexts. I am chiefly talking about the social sciences, arts, and humanities (SSAH). These fields have so far struggled to articulate to students why an essay, for example, is useful for future careers. In failing to do so, and somewhat ironically considering the critical impetus of these fields in general, such disciplines, within which I am trained in and advocate for, are failing to respond to the overriding neoliberalized valuation of a university education as it exists today. Such a vision places overwhelming emphasis on the usefulness of degrees for students' employability prospects, sold as golden tickets to the white-collar payroll. While the accuracy of this vision is increasingly being challenged by squeezed global graduate job markets, it is the contention of this piece that the SSAH need to do more to address this core marketized mythos of the neoliberal academy *in pedagogical practice*—as well as in their critiques—if they are to stand any chance against AI fundamentally hollowing out the epistemic integrity of the disciplines they are constituted by. This involves either using the current discourse of employability to their advantage when presenting the value of assessed work, or, more optimistically, offering alternative visions to its basic logic—one that does not so simply peg the value of a university education to 'employability skills' and 'employability skills' alone.

The first strategy is to play the game *better*, as it were. This would involve selling the value of existing styles of SSAH assessments more directly in terms of professional skills. Essays, reports, or blogs, for instance, cultivate critical thinking and analysis; the interpretation of a brief; research and information literacy; structuring and organization; language skills; and argumentation. All of these skills are very much relevant to future careers involving writing, communication, and analytical work of any kind. Another approach could be to switch up the focus on the written

Published online: 10 December 2025

word to consider more task-based assessments that directly replicate the style of working required within professional contexts. Group presentations, structured debates, or seminar engagement scores could cultivate teamworking skills, persuasion, and interpersonal connection; communication skills could be targeted through in-person vivas, podcasts or discussion-based round-tables. In general, SSAH could emphasize the big picture thinking their degrees provide, the sensitivity to diversity inherent within them, and the critical thinking that is central to a student's success—all valuable assets for prospective employers to consider. Obviously, these types of re-designs increase the workload for already pressured colleagues, likewise with their grading. Yet, while very brief, these surface level examples demonstrate that this type of bridging work is easy enough to do, and can fulfill the discursive requirements and expectations of the neoliberalized academy, even if it does smack a little of desperation.

More hopefully, the second option is for the SSAH to offer a different narrative to their assessments, shifting the emphasis from employability skills to the opportunities they provide for *human expression*. Now, this may irk some as a bit wishy-washy. Moreover, one may wonder how this is different from the everyday, pervasive injunction to express oneself on social media, which is a key (and unfortunate) characteristic of online life in the present age. However, universities' role in facilitating expression can offer something much more profound than the vacuous outrage of the digital public sphere, one instead that is centered on listening, genuine empathy, and care for those that pass through our doors. Having a voice, and it being listened to, remains a privilege in the global context. In many liberal democracies, the ostensible paragon for individual freedom today, even, it cannot be said to be entirely secure. Yet opening opportunities for expression remains an ideal worth striving toward for how it can improve a person's confidence, feeling of self-worth, sense of self, validation, and trust in others. Beyond the archaic (and often misleading) political hopes allocated to dialog in the cosmopolitan imaginary, a student simply having a teacher read, take-in, and respond to something they have produced can be transformative for those involved. It remains a core privilege and duty at the heart of the pedagogic relationship. If the role of universities is to be more than a cog in the employability machine, perhaps we can do well to emphasize this, linking the education we provide to more enduring aspects of the collective human experience.

Maybe those in the SSAH can re-imagine assessments less in terms of judgment, and more like a space for self-actualization and growth: a pedagogical partnership, rather than a consumer exchange. This involves an appeal to a different justificatory order that places the value of the human individual in their own thoughts and feelings, not just the 'skills' they can offer a future business. I realize this is wishful thinking to an extreme, replacing one set of contingent norms with another. I realize that this also rubs up against some of the principal logics of quality assurance and attainment that underscore current Higher Education, and its aims perhaps seem unfeasible for time-pressured and often precarious university teachers. But if we play the game we have created for AI we will never win. No human individual can match the recall, delivery of information, or speed of GenAI. Instead, as I argue, we should encourage students to use assessments as an opportunity to express something impossible to AI—a human voice.

AI has not created this current crisis in university assessments. Rather, it has revealed a fundamental weakness in how universities are selling the value of higher education to our students. That is, if the only motivating goal of education is supposedly for students to get a useful degree for their careers, why wouldn't they do everything in their power to pass their assessments using AI, to attain the highest grade possible? If we lead with such cynically instrumentalized purposes for our universities, why would we expect our students to behave in any other way within them? As I have argued above, those of us working within the social sciences, arts and humanities need to make a choice: double down on the prevailing pedagogical logic, respond creatively to it, and fully accept its thresholds, or provide compelling alternatives and try out a different valuation of the type of human activity and exchange the university can facilitate. Regardless of the decision, it is time to recognize that our discussions of the impact of AI in universities—in assessments and beyond—require a confrontation with the epistemic, business and cultural values of higher education as a whole. Anything less misses the point. More importantly, however, it is the contention of this piece that anything less is a missed opportunity.

Curmudgeon Corner Curmudgeon Corner is a short opinionated column on trends in technology, arts, science and society, commenting on issues of concern to the research community and wider society. Whilst the drive for super-human intelligence promotes potential benefits to wider society, it also raises deep concerns of existential risk, thereby highlighting the need for an ongoing conversation between technology and society. At the core of Curmudgeon concern is the question: What is it to be human in the age of the AI machine? -Editor.

Author contribution ND is the sole author and was responsible for conceptualization and writing of the manuscript.

Data availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declare no competing interests.