

OCTOBER 2026

Keeping the learning real

An integrated approach to academic integrity
in the age of AI

WONKHE Studiosity



INTRODUCTION

AI has ripped up the rulebook

AI has ripped up the rulebook on academic integrity. The definition of academic misconduct – passing off someone else’s work as your own – is no longer sufficient. And the mechanisms to detect it aren’t reliable.

During September 2026 Wonkhe and Studiosity conducted a “temperature check” of sector progress on securing academic integrity in the age of AI.

Separately we have each conducted our own studies of students’ experiences with AI this year. [Polling by YouGov for Studiosity on student wellbeing and AI](#) found fully three-quarters of students polled reporting stress over perceived risks of being wrongly accused of plagiarism over use of AI tools. And Wonkhe’s [Trained to stop learning](#) report found that assessment design that incorporates accountability for learning is the most reliable predictor of whether students use AI to learn, or on “autopilot”.

More broadly, these studies revealed a mixed picture on AI adoption, with policies still in development and/or unevenly applied in institutions, lack of clarity about appropriate or permitted AI use in assessment, attempts to penalise students for academic misconduct based on patchy evidence and, consequently, real and significant stress for students.

Much of this is understandable. It’s clear that, especially in humanities, social sciences, and creative arts, AI has brought a significant challenge with it in placing learning and assessment processes under considerable strain, as well as prompting intensive debate among students and institutional staff about the ethics and propriety of AI use in learning contexts.

It would have been surprising, indeed, if institutions had been able to seamlessly pivot, and develop and implement new policies, without any friction, especially given the pace of technological change the sector had to contend with. So blame and recrimination is not the order of the day – instead our goal is to pool some collective insight and support the sector’s trajectory towards a set of fair, transparent, and above all, workable set of policies and practices around securing academic integrity.

WHAT WE DID

Our temperature check consisted of a short desk-based review of current guidance and practice, two online round tables with senior leaders in institutions and professional association representatives, and a third online round table with student representatives.

The conversations surfaced a lot of examples of developments in practice achieved at some pace, against a backdrop of continued rapid technological development and a broad and contested range of views about AI adoption in institutions. The sector is moving forward on defining and developing students' and staff AI literacy, on reconfiguring assessments for the AI age, and in managing the risk of misconduct.

In the absence of a robust straightforward AI detection mechanism, a supportive and developmental approach is becoming embedded as the most likely to embed academic integrity, but there remains more to do to navigate between the poles of good pedagogy and academic support for students to use AI appropriately, and accountability and management of the risks to secure academic integrity.

This report sets out the findings of our temperature check exercise, and advocates a focus on integrating the various domains of practice development as much as possible so that each element reinforces the others, and the overall picture is as robust as possible. We also hope our schema is useful in informing discussions with students and staff with the aim of creating as open and safe a conversation as possible around AI adoption – with a key word arising from our conversation being “trust.”

We hope you find it a useful resource to inform your ongoing work.

WHERE THE SECTOR IS

A shift from policing and detection to integration

Broadly, institution leaders described a positive intention to move away from initial calls to blanket ban use of AI and associated focus on detecting its use in assessment, to a more nuanced position, starting with acceptance of the ubiquity of AI tools, and the problems with generating robust evidence of inappropriate use, and moving towards a measured adoption of AI as part of a rounded learning experience. Earlier versions of AI policy were framed around prohibition, and the focus now is responsible, pedagogically appropriate use while keeping learning authentic.

It is easy to see, however, how this shift creates a new set of challenges to overcome. Most participants described their policy on AI in assessment as requiring a mixture of “closed” (ie AI use is not permitted) and “open” (AI use is permitted) forms of assessment. Some have adopted the “traffic light” approach in which all assessment briefs must indicate whether AI use is not permitted (red), permitted to an extent (amber), or is integrated into the assessment (green). Still others have adopted the Perkins five-point scale ranging from “no AI” to “full AI”, or some mixture of these approaches.

Implementation of these more nuanced policies requires a much greater degree of coordination than an outright ban, with significant assessment redesign, developing student and staff digital and AI literacy, and effective communications of complex issues and expectations to students.

There is, it must be said, enormous opportunity to support effective pedagogy and move forward with agendas like authentic assessment, assessment for learning, and co-creation with students. Yet we observe that these policies generally don’t fully address the problem of validating whether learning has indeed taken place in that it still typically requires some mechanism to define appropriate use and offset against risks of cognitive offloading.

Our round table with student representatives revealed that students have observed this shift from policing to enablement taking place, but that the strategic direction adopted at institutional level hasn't always filtered through to practice on the ground. The decisions taken about changing approaches to assessment can seem arbitrary to students, with little explanation offered or student input sought.

Some expressed a view that the change is a result of pressure to look innovative and keep pace, rather than the outcome of a fully worked-through position – and several institutional leaders noted that the pace of technology change is giving them concern that the systems they have built will not be sustainable.

We're building the road while driving it, when it comes to GenAI and assessment.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADER

The conversation among the students we spoke to remains focused on legitimate use, detection, and the resultant anxiety around AI use, rather than enhancing support for students to exercise judgement to advance their learning. This suggests that there is more to do to fully enact this intended shift away from policing and towards enablement. A study of universities' AI policies by Sam Illingworth for HEPI conducted in February 2026 found that many policies are framed in the language of educational benefit, but in practice consist of measures to define and police acceptable use – a tension Illingworth sees as undermining efforts to foster critical thought and trust around students' use of AI.

We'd argue that while support, dialogue, and effective assessment design are critical elements of an effective approach to academic integrity, there will always be a need to set boundaries around legitimate use and to incorporate accountability for learning into the curriculum in some way. The key is integrating efforts to support and enhance students' learning with accountability and validation, ensuring the overall approach feels coherent and explicable to students.

THE FRAMEWORK

Building coherence for and with students



If academic integrity work has shifted away from defining and policing misconduct into supporting and enabling effective AI use, then the work of securing academic integrity spreads more widely across the institution. Across our conversations, we identified five thematic areas where institutions are working to make progress. We have represented these as a framework that could help institutions, in consultation with students, to coordinate and integrate different areas of work, support open discussion of how to move forward with AI, and make visible some of the underlying thinking and intent.

-  **A culture of trust, open discussion and ethical judgement** – the ring that holds the other four together.
-  **AI literacy** – baseline literacy for all, discipline-specific competence, and judgement.
-  **'Closed' assessments** – moments of accountability without AI, where there is a reason for them.
-  **'Open' assessments** – tasks redesigned to permit or require AI, planned across a programme.
-  **Validating learning** – declarations, vivas and self-validation that check learning happened.

The framework is drawn in full on the next page, and each domain is set out in turn on the pages that follow.

The framework

SUPPORT AND ENABLE

AI literacy

WHAT IT ADDS

Baseline literacy for all students and staff, discipline-specific competence on top, and the judgement to match tool, task and context.

ON ITS OWN

Rules and training don't secure learning – takeup is uneven, and judgement is built in dialogue, not by instruction.

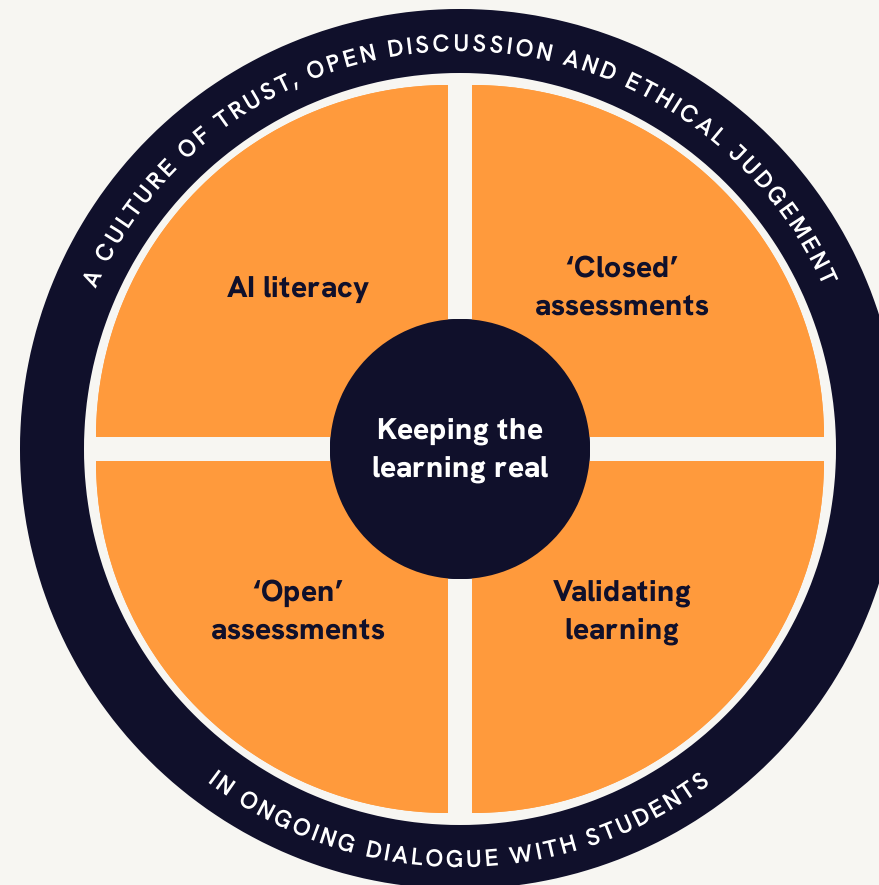
'Open' assessments

WHAT IT ADDS

Tasks redesigned from first principles of validity that permit or require AI, planned at programme level as a varied assessment diet.

ON ITS OWN

Unexplained variation and vague briefs ("assist", "brainstorm") leave students guessing – and still don't show learning happened.



ASSURE AND VALIDATE

'Closed' assessments

WHAT IT ADDS

A moment of accountability – validating foundational knowledge without AI, where there is a pedagogical reason to do so.

ON ITS OWN

Hard to secure against wearables, heavy on space and staff, and a live inclusion question. Not a panacea.

Validating learning

WHAT IT ADDS

Declarations, vivas and self-validation that check learning has actually happened where AI was allowed.

ON ITS OWN

Vivas don't scale; declarations feel like policing when guidance is unclear. This is where the residual risk sits.

DOMAIN 1 OF 5

A culture of trust, open discussion and ethical judgement



In the early days of AI some asked why institutions did not simply “trust students”. This formulation, while well-meaning, is arguably something of an abrogation of the responsibility to do the work of building a culture around AI use that encourages managed exploration, ethical reasoning, and open debate. The best approaches to academic integrity have always been based on an assumption that, by and large, students don’t want to cheat. That very assumption, if visible to students, acts on its own terms as a deterrent to intentional cheating. But that doesn’t mean students don’t need help and support to understand how to use tools responsibly, exercise critical judgement and “own” their work.

Students pointed out that AI is fundamentally an untrustworthy technology or should only be trusted up to a point, while institutional leaders reflected on the ways that AI has crept into students’ interactions with the institution in ways that may not have been discussed or made transparent – staff using AI to mark and provide feedback was cited as a particular issue.

We also set the tone in our institutions by the way in which we are or are not using AI in our organisational development... How are we modelling our use of AI as a business, and what are they seeing?

INSTITUTIONAL LEADER

Teaching staff are instrumental in building students’ critical judgement, rather than dictating. Leaders and students both reflected that when staff are open in discussing AI and model critical use, rather than simply setting out rules, students’ confidence grows. As one leader commented: “Some staff members... it’s all doom and gloom, or telling students that it’s shameful or naughty to use AI, so the students shut down, and students then are even nervous about declaring appropriate use of AI, because they think they’re going to be flagged up for academic misconduct.” Lots of institutions are working in a context where some staff and students are taking a principled stance against AI, and are working through how practically to manage that position, including considering whether students will be academically disadvantaged who do not use AI.

We have to find a way for those students to be able to critically engage with AI and about AI and without AI, so that they're able to function and contribute to society outside of the campus.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADER

DOMAIN 2 OF 5

AI literacy



Institutions are evolving their work to build AI literacy and many feel confident in their offer, though sometimes less secure in the level of uptake. An important distinction is emerging between:

- **Baseline AI literacy** including things like familiarity with the range of tools generally available and their applications, particularly to general productivity and specified generic tasks
- **Discipline and industry specific AI competences**, meaning familiarity with particular disciplinary or professional contexts and the ability to apply AI appropriately to them
- **Cutting-edge AI fluency**

AI literacy, that has to be the floor... baseline, all students, all staff. You then get to AI competency, and that is where you have some of that discipline-specific flex... When employers come and talk to us, they talk about AI literacy. What they actually mean is that AI competency piece.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADER

For students, just because an AI tool supports workplace productivity, that doesn't mean it will be appropriate to use as a shortcut in a learning context. Additionally, the pace of change means that the application of AI tools in industry will evolve. AI competence doesn't mean repetitively applying a particular tool to a particular task, but learning how to think about the application of AI tools to meet a particular objective at a high standard.

Graduates need to be adaptable, and whatever AI they're using now, it won't be the same AI that they're using in their job in three, five years' time... we need to build in that literacy so they're able to cope with that change.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADER

AI literacy work dovetails with academic integrity work because it is about developing the judgement to appropriately marry up tool, task, and context. For learning contexts, AI literacy, or competence, looks like showing the exercise of your own judgement, not adhering to a rule-based approach – though rules may offer a useful starting point from which to build critical judgement they are not sufficient to prepare a graduate to manage in the world of work.

FURTHER READING

Ethical AI in Higher Education: Boosting Learning, Retention and Progression – Rebecca Mace for Studiosity. A report that engages in depth with AI literacy and what it means for learning.

DOMAIN 3 OF 5

‘Closed’ assessments



Where institutions have adopted a policy that some assessments may or must be “closed” the question then is how to ensure that they are truly secure. In-person pen and paper exams, or otherwise synchronous assessments on “locked-down” machines, remain in use in some institutions and disciplines and have the benefit of validating foundational knowledge.

However, the routine use of synchronous assessment has limitations, requiring significant physical space and resource to manage. Institutional leaders and students raised concerns about how closed synchronous assessments can realistically be, given the increase in wearable technology.

Even in exams, we've had instances of students with Meta glasses... We've had them wear Meta glasses during vivas, and where we don't want to be is an exam point where invigilators are basically doing a... ridiculous security check on every student that goes in there. It's not fair on the invigilator.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADER

Both institutional leaders and students raised the question of how inclusive synchronous assessments are, in light of the increase in requests for reasonable adjustments. Synchronous assessments, whether written exam or oral assessment can put additional pressure on students, some of which may be appropriate and warranted, but it requires careful handling and attention to different students' needs.

As someone who signs off escalated programme amendments... I have seen an attempt by programmes to try and bring people back in person into rooms. So we have to constantly ask for that to be tempered and reviewed.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADER

Closed assessments are seen as offering the desired "moment of accountability" for students demonstrating their knowledge, but they are not a panacea. Given they have some significant drawbacks both practically and pedagogically, institutions are seeking to use them only where there is pedagogical justification for doing so, not just as an answer to the AI integrity puzzle.

DOMAIN 4 OF 5

'Open' assessments



All institutions are, to some degree, engaging in assessment redesign to create assessments that in their format and in the briefing provided permit or actively encourage use of AI. This involves a return to the first principles of assessment validity: what are we trying to test and can we be sure that the assessment we have designed actually tests it?

It was observed that AI drives evolution of thinking not just about assessment format and brief, but about curriculum and the relevance of intended learning outcomes. AI can be a really useful tool to develop novel assessment briefs, for example, by asking students to create something using AI and critique it.

There are colleagues that are really excited, as I am, about the opportunities that this gives us to actually rethink the way we assess students' knowledge and understanding. And we're designing some really exciting assessments.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADER

While assessment redesign will play out at module level, institutional leaders are focusing on programme level analysis, assessing overall AI vulnerability and overall assessment diet across a programme. What works and what is considered legitimate use varies enormously between disciplines, and between types of assessment. Institutional leaders recognise that disciplinary variation is appropriate and to be expected.

The aim is not, as rule, to create a universal set of rules around AI use (though a broad institutional baseline may be adopted), but to apply academic integrity frameworks in context. This, of course, requires module leaders to engage in some detail to update their assessment briefs and explain this to students.

There needs to be some consistency, but there needs to be enough agency for subject-level staff to have their input, and they know their subjects best. So it's how can you work with them to try to work out what a reasonable use of AI looks like for their subject areas.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADER

Ultimately, it's desirable to get to the point of a varied assessment diet across a programme, in which students have the opportunity to use AI in various ways across various kinds of output and the institution can be confident that learning outcomes are assessed in aggregate.

But it's in this work that inconsistency in practice starts to play an outsized role. As different staff members apply their institutional policy to different kinds of assessment, students will receive different information about legitimate AI use in different modules or across different programmes. In-depth discussion surfaced the issue as being, not about variation in practice per se, but about unexplained variation. Students need to know why they have been asked to take a particular approach to a particular assessment, not just given a list of rules about what they are supposed to do.

We need module conveners teaching similar assessments to actually be talking to each other, and making sure that's consistent. Honestly, we're not at that place yet. But we need to get there quickly.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADER

The other key issue is where policies, frameworks, and assessment briefs are vague about the expected, or permitted use. For example, guidance may indicate that students may use AI to "assist" or steer them towards using it for "brainstorming". The meanings of these terms may not be perfectly clear to students from the written word, and require in-class discussion and clarification with the lecturer to build confidence about what those terms mean in context. Students at particular risk may include those for whom English is not their first language, or neurodivergent students.

I think that our categories of AI were good at the time, but I think that there's a massive interpretive load that comes with it, and I definitely think that some of our categories are really open to staff and student interpretation.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADER

DOMAIN 5 OF 5

Validating students' learning



While the intent is to get to the point where assessment design is sufficiently sophisticated as to make it very difficult for students to simply outsource the assessment to AI, where assessment is open, there remains a need to validate students' learning.

Many institutions have adopted AI declaration forms which require students to set out, and sometimes document with evidence, how they have used AI in a given assessment. Where the guidance on legitimate use is clear and students are confident, and declaration is framed as an element of ethical practice, completing such a form should be fairly straightforward – students noted that a checklist approach can be helpful.

However, where guidance is unclear or open to interpretation, students don't feel confident, and the declaration process itself is a source of anxiety – students feel policed rather than supported, and little real reflection on cognitive processes and learning can be shown to have occurred.

Some institutions are building into policies the right to viva students to check and validate learning, sometimes prompted by suspected AI use. While a viva approach is a reasonably robust way to validate learning, it does not typically scale and can in most cases only be used selectively. Part of the calculus is that the potential for facing a viva post-submission will stack the incentives towards appropriate AI use. Vivas will not, however, as one leader reflected, help a student who has intentionally or unwittingly over-relied on AI for a critical assessment, and now faces the consequences of failure.

Where we see a difference is when we conduct a viva – a moment of accountability. And for some of the students, the difference is very, very stark... they just can't answer any question, and this, for me, is the real problem. The learning hasn't happened.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADER

PARTNER

How Studiosity can help

Studiosity's Support and Validate framework offers students pedagogically sound formative feedback while shifting academic integrity away from punitive detection toward positive learning assurance via AI-infused assessment design.

Students draft their assignments, receive formative feedback, and then are invited to reflect and self-validate their learning through viva-style prompts or Cloze questions. Assessments are submitted with the self-validation work.

By empowering students to actively demonstrate their own authorship and understanding, this approach preserves critical thinking, restores trust, and protects institutional credibility.

To explore Studiosity's learning assurance framework, visit www.studiosity.com

CONCLUSION

Bringing it all together



We think that the conclusion from our “temperature check” exercise points not to any one of these areas as a focus for further development, but the active integration of all together so that they are mutually reinforcing. Each of the areas discussed have challenges and limitations that are not readily “fixable” – so a robust approach to academic integrity can only come from attention to the coordination in practice of the whole system, not the treatment of any one aspect in isolation.

Each of the areas requires ongoing dialogue with students, to explore views, explain approaches, check understanding and test the development of critical judgement. Student representatives hate it when institutions draft a policy then send it to them for feedback – they want to be in on the ground floor, defining the issues, integrating student views from the beginning, and shaping the institutional response. At module and programme level the securing of academic integrity depends on the exercise of critical judgement on the part of educators and students, and that is generally developed in dialogue, not through instruction.

Notwithstanding that challenges remain, it was clear from our conversations that the sector has made significant and remarkable progress, particularly in the work on assessment redesign. The residual risk, as we see it, is in the area of learning validation for open assessments, where existing accountability mechanisms are either all but impossible to scale in the case of oral examination, or too mechanistic, in the case of AI declarations.

The framework

SUPPORT AND ENABLE

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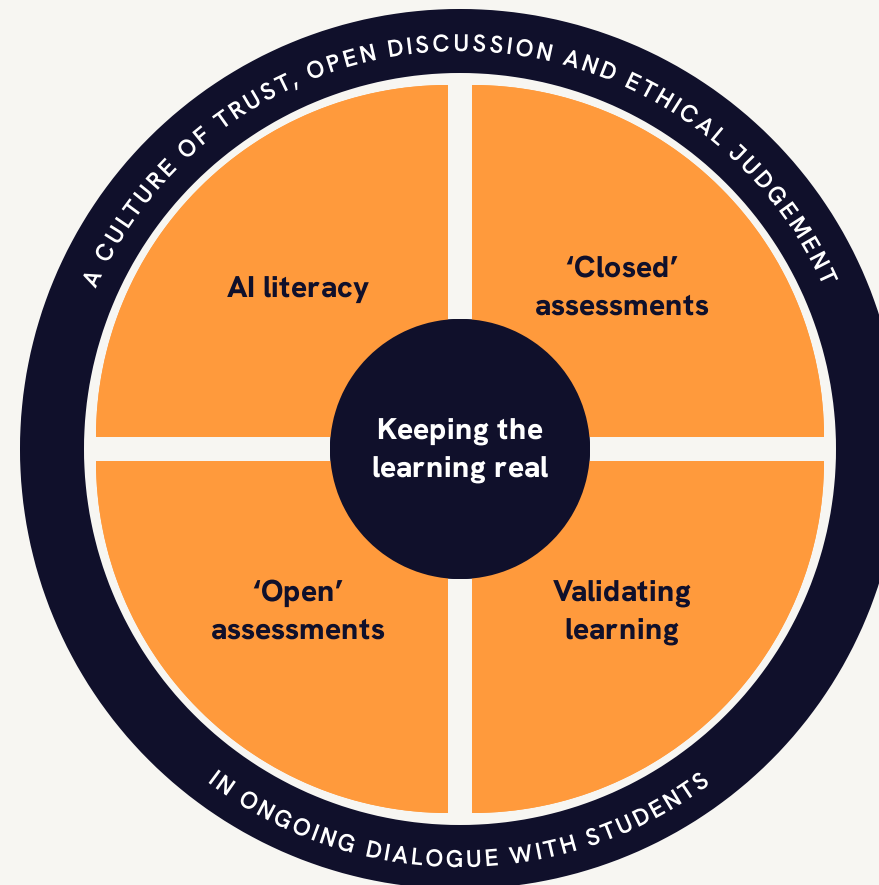
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Wonkhe is the home of the higher education debate. **Studiosity** provides formative feedback and learning assurance to universities worldwide.

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