U21 Transforming Assessment Project - Stage 1 Summary of Key Themes

In September 2023, U21 commenced a 12–18-month long project called "Transforming Assessment in a New Era" under the lead of Prof. Joanne Wright, DVC, University of Sydney. U21 member universities that have submitted case studies in relation to the project will be interviewed throughout the duration of the project.[1]

When investigating key themes from case studies and interviews, the most common recent example is the introduction of Generative AI and the implication of large language models for assessment. Perennial discussion surrounding the equity and integrity of assessment remains the wider focus of many policies aimed at improving assessment within Higher Education.

Initial findings reveal that a number of member universities have updated their existing guidelines in relation to academic integrity and misconduct in response to the availability of generative AI. These guidelines were often informed by and built from approaches developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Universities have often shown a positive resilience to change since the pandemic and took a lead when AI was first introduced to hold consultations with staff and students at all levels to clarify how much of an impact AI would have on assessment. Many have held forums to discuss and disseminate information regarding GenAI, with some having held workshops and publishing information on their websites. Some universities, especially Australian universities, are working on revising their policies regarding assessment. Continuously emphasised during this stage of the project was the dynamic nature of guidelines to continually be updated to reflect the pace of change of AI and other new technologies.

In general, universities have released guidelines for academic staff in regard to GenAI and have encouraged them to rethink how they assess their students, yet have not mandated that changes need to be made. This non-directive approach allows for teaching staff to develop their own judgment to using AI in the most appropriate way for each of their disciplines. Teaching staff are encouraged to share their own use of these new assessment and teaching practices. Many also regarded AI literacy as essential and saw the importance of preparing students for the workforce through the use of GenAI tools. Some universities have made modules on GenAI available to staff and students. From the interviews, it seems that some instructors have adapted their assessment methods, while others have not. There is no evidence of uniform implementation across the universities. Academic staff have overall been able to practice the implementation of AI and adapting their assessment practices at their own pace and discretion.

Securing academic integrity has been a common theme, with one member going back to mainly pen-and-paper exams after a significant increase in academic misconduct reports during the pandemic. Some institutions have used novel approaches, such as making a platform available that allows their instructors to create their own GenAI bots for their students to use.

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[1] Special thanks to all the Universities Interviewed so far, including The University of Hong Kong, The University of Sydney, The University of Glasgow, Lund University, University of Johannesburg, McMaster University, University of California - Davis, and Tec De Monterrey University.

Although a lot of the guidance developed in relation to online assessment has laid the groundwork for developing a robust response to AI, the pace of change is different than that of the pandemic. Whereas during the pandemic there was a more unified response across the whole of the university by necessity, for AI and other new technologies, more independence is given in some cases. While it is agreed that students should be encouraged to engage to better prepare them for the workspace, this raises the challenge of ensuring that all academics engage with ways to change learning and assessment.