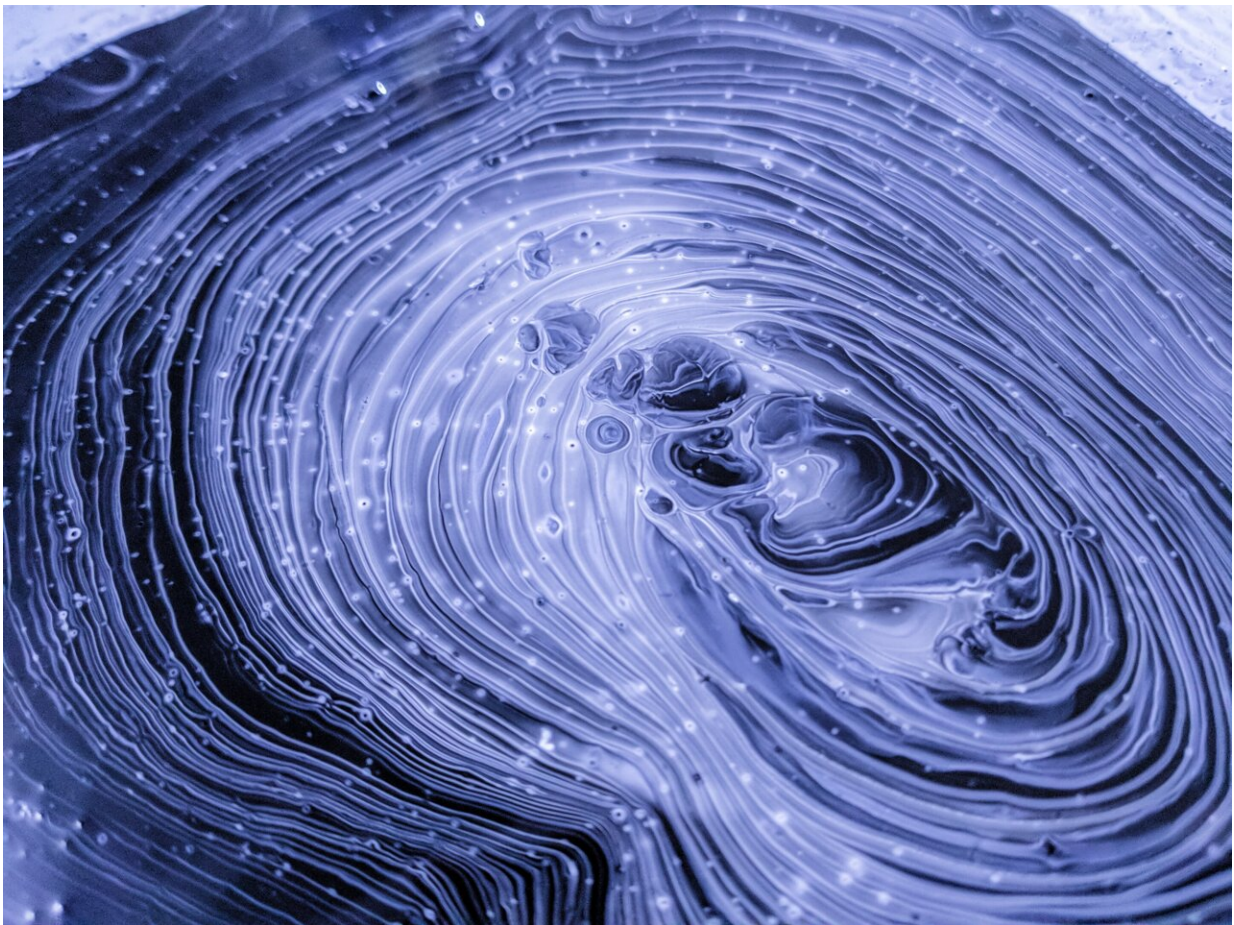# Opinion: ChatGPT is the push higher education needs to rethink assessment

March 13 2023, by Sioux McKenna, Dan Dixon, Daniel Oppenheimer, Margaret Blackie and Sam Illingworth

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The COVID-19 pandemic was a shock to higher education [systems everywhere](#). But while some changes, like moving lectures online, were relatively easy to make, assessment posed a much bigger challenge. Assessment can take many forms, from essays to exams to experiments and more.

Many institutions and individual academics essentially outsourced the [assessment](#) process to software. They increased their use of programs like Turnitin to check for matched wording in students' assignments. And for closed-book, timed tests they used tools such as Proctorio, which monitor a [student](#)'s computer or phone while they write exams.

But universities did not seize this chance to reflect on what higher education is for and how assessment might be used to enhance its achievement. Instead they doubled down on the status quo, breathing a sigh of relief once isolation and lockdown orders were revoked and things could return to "normal."

The advent of ChatGPT and similar chatbots provides another opportunity for the sector to reflect on why and how it assesses—and what higher education is for.

[ChatGPT](#) is a chatbot technology, powered by [artificial intelligence](#) (AI), that enables users to have natural, human-like conversations with a computer. It uses advanced language processing techniques to understand user input and provide natural, contextual responses. With ChatGPT, users can converse with a computer in a way that feels like talking to a real person. It scrapes information from a [large database](#) mined from the internet and uses this to create a unique response to a prompt.

So, for instance, it can write an essay on any topic—"the advantages of breastfeeding" or "the social complexity of the refugee crisis in Europe."

It can also be trained to provide context-specific essays.

We are academics from South Africa, Australia, the UK and the US, working in fields related to education, ways of learning and teaching, and academic practice. We believe ChatGPT could be a powerful impetus to shift from understanding assessment as the assurance of an educational "product" to assessment as learning.

Used properly, it could be a valuable way to teach students about critical thinking, writing and the broader role of artificial intelligence tools like chatbots in the world today.

Threat or opportunity?

The advent of ChatGPT has prompted a variety of reactions from universities all over the world. In the UK, for instance, the reaction towards ChatGPT and higher education has veered from the hyperbolic —will AI ruin universities?—to the more measured, such as considering what students think of the technology.

If the purpose of higher education is that students memorize and summarize a body of knowledge, and that this is then certified via assessment, then ChatGPT is an existential threat. The market value of credentials is directly threatened if universities can no longer confidently assert that the texts assessed by academics have indeed been produced by their students.

But if the purpose of higher education is to nurture a transformative relationship to a particular body of knowledge that enables students to see the world—and their place in it—in new ways, then assessment takes on a vastly different meaning.

Used well, ChatGPT and similar tools can show students the wonders

and responsibilities of acquiring and building powerful knowledge. It can assist rather than being seen in opposition to their learning.

Here are four ways this might happen.

Four potential applications

1. Students can reflect on articles produced by ChatGPT which have fabricated references and distorted information and then deliberate on the potential consequences of this in an era of fake news.

2. Students can be set assignments that require them to compare ChatGPT's answers to ones they have developed and ascertain whether they know the material and how it might be represented differently.

3. ChatGPT can be used to support essay writing and to help foster a sense of mastery and autonomy. Students can analyze ChatGPT responses to note how the software has drawn from multiple sources and to identify flaws in the ChatGPT responses which would need their attention.

4. Students can be encouraged to consider the extent to which their use of ChatGPT has enabled or constrained their access to powerful knowledge. This is a chance to critically reflect on where and how the use of AI is taking place in society and their potential future professions.

There is already a multitude of ideas available online about how ChatGPT can be used to create prompts for assignments. Lecturers and students can explore these to see how they might be adapted for their own learning and teaching needs.

None of these ideas will be simple to implement. Academics will need support from their institutions in considering what such technological

developments mean for their disciplines. And, we'd argue, that support must help academics to move beyond seeking ways to trick the software or to monitor students.

Innovation and inclusion

Society and the higher education sector squandered the opportunity that COVID presented to reflect on what higher education was for and how assessment might be used to enhance learning.

Rather than signaling the end of higher education, ChatGPT has instead presented the sector, and society more broadly, with another opportunity. This is a chance to develop innovative and inclusive teaching, learning, and assessment aligned to such understandings.

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