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## Future-Focused:

*Educating in an Era of Continuous Change*


# GenAI policy evolution at Southern Cross University


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Southern Cross University (SCU) has adopted a proactive, educative, and iterative approach to integrating Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) into learning and assessment. Recognising the limitations of early binary models, SCU developed and trialled increasingly nuanced frameworks, culminating in a practical and pedagogically aligned three-level model. This model categorises assessments based on permitted GenAI use and is embedded into formal assessment infrastructure, offering clarity for students and staff while promoting ethical and context-sensitive engagement. Supporting materials, including descriptor guidelines and task-specific use cases, were co-developed with educators and students and informed by empirical research on student responses to GenAI use. This paper outlines the policy journey, highlighting how SCU's model balances institutional integrity, academic innovation, and sector guidance.



*Keywords:* Generative Artificial Intelligence, Assessment Policy, Academic Integrity, Digital Literacy


## Introduction

The emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is one of the most significant shifts in higher education in recent decades (Quince et al., 2024a; Weng et al., 2024). Tools such as Copilot, ChatGPT and other large language models (LLMs) are transforming how students learn and how educators design, assess and support learning (Cela et al., 2025). This rapid transformation has presented institutions with challenges such as risk awareness, ethical use, assessment integrity and opportunities for enhancing innovation in learning and teaching (Quince & Nikolic, 2025). Southern Cross University (SCU) has responded with a proactive, educative and iterative approach that prioritises clarity, capability and ethical engagement. This approach aligns with the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency's (TEQSA) recent shift from an educative approach to the requirement to demonstrate how risks to assessment integrity and compliance with the Threshold Standards are managed (TEQSA, 2025). Rather than defaulting to surveillance or restriction, SCU's GenAI strategic direction reflects sectoral calls for policy approaches that enable critical digital literacy, assessment reform and inclusive pedagogy (Bearman et al., 2024; Boud & Carless, 2018). The goal is not merely to manage risk, but to enhance the learning experience by embedding GenAI use within purposeful curriculum design. SCU's response aligns with frameworks that promote academic integrity through capability building and transparency rather than punitive enforcement (Bretag et al., 2018a, 2018b; Goh et al., 2024).

Since early 2023, SCU has developed and trialled multiple frameworks, beginning with a binary 2 model and evolving toward a three-level structure. Each stage has deepened institutional understanding and enhanced teaching practice. This evolution has been underpinned by evidence from both institutional practice at SCU and national guidance from professional and governing bodies such as TEQSA and the Australasian Academic Integrity Network (AAIN). The current three-level model is supported by comprehensive staff toolkits, assessment exemplars, and student-facing materials hosted on SCU's Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) GenAI webpages. This infrastructure ensures that GenAI is not positioned as a threat to academic standards but as an opportunity to prepare students for active participation and success in a GenAI integrated society. This paper outlines the evolution of GenAI practice, highlighting how SCU's model reflects the broader imperative for institutions to act swiftly but thoughtfully. It offers a case study in pedagogically driven governance and provides insights for institutions seeking to build policies that are principled, practical and agile to the changing realities of higher education.

## Early Models of GenAI Use at SCU

### Two-lane model

In early 2023, Southern Cross University adopted a foundational model in response to the rapid rise of GenAI tools such as ChatGPT. Commonly known within the sector as the "two-lane" model (Liu & Bridgeman, 2023),

it offered a binary distinction: GenAI use was either permitted or prohibited in assessment tasks. Students were guided by the following statement 'You [are permitted/ not permitted] to use generative AI (Gen AI) tools to complete components of this assignment. Conditions of use are specified below. Permitted uses [List of Uses]. Prohibited uses [List of Uses].' This model emerged at a time of high uncertainty, with staff expressing concern over the potential for widespread academic misconduct and students experimenting with GenAI without clear guidance. The simplicity of the model had practical advantages. It provided immediate clarity for educators and administrators, allowed for centralised communication, and enabled consistent messaging across faculties and colleges. It also aligned with early responses from other institutions, many of which introduced short-term bans or restrictive statements aimed at maintaining academic standards (Yusuf et al., 2024).

However, the binary approach had notable limitations. It did not account for the wide variation in how different disciplines engage with GenAI. As argued by Curtis (2025), "going down this two-lane road may have devilish consequences" (p.2) as GenAI use and detection are more nuanced than first thought. In fields such as education and media, educators saw potential for students to use GenAI to support creativity and critical reflection (Wei et al., 2025). In contrast, courses with professional accreditation requirements often need stricter controls (Francis et al., 2025). The two-lane model struggled to accommodate these nuances. Research on technology integration in higher education warns against binary thinking, particularly in fast-moving innovation contexts. As Williamson et al. (2020) argue, digital policy must be flexible enough to support both innovation and deliberation. For SCU, this insight became increasingly relevant as feedback from staff and students indicated that the two-lane model constrained rather than enabled pedagogical development. Student representatives reported to the University's Teaching and Assessment Committee that they did not know what GenAI tools they were permitted to use, when they could use GenAI and when it was restricted. Students felt anxious about using GenAI and often defaulted to not using GenAI in fear of academic integrity breaches.

**Five-tier model**

In response to these limitations, in August, 2024, SCU's Centre for Teaching and Learning developed a more granular framework: the five-tiered model. This model introduced a continuum of GenAI engagement, ranging from complete prohibition to open collaboration, which was missing in the two-lane approach. It reflected a deliberate shift toward policy that could align more closely with curriculum design and disciplinary variation. The Artificial Intelligence Assessment Scale (Perkins et al., 2024) informed the development of a five-tier model that supported the principles of the Southern Cross Model and addressed staff and student concerns. Each "tier" in the model was defined by specific expectations regarding GenAI use, accompanied by example assessment types.

At tier 1, students were permitted to use GenAI tools throughout the entire assessment, which was applicable to tasks such as portfolios, projects, and analyses. Tier 2 allowed GenAI use for specific assessment tasks or purposes as identified by the Unit Assessor, with examples including research proposals, programming, and mapping. Tier 3 enabled students to use GenAI for generating initial ideas, drafts, and structures, or for editing to improve language and reference formatting. This was commonly applied to essays, reports, theses, and drafts. At tier 4, GenAI use was limited to editing only, such as making language improvements or formatting references, and was relevant for reflective writing, curriculum vitae, and peer review tasks. Finally, tier 5 prohibited any use of GenAI tools in both the assessment and its development, applying to formats such as viva voce, yarning circles, and invigilated exams

The assessment types were also guided by a parallel best practice model for assessment security that was developed based on the frequency of academic integrity breaches for misuse of GenAI and staff expertise in the use of GenAI. Each assessment type was given a rating according to its perceived security level. This approach promoted discussion with academic staff and with the teaching and assessment committee members about the security of various assessment types to ensure students meet learning outcomes (TEQSA, 2021). For instance, one tier permitted limited use for idea 4 generation, while another allowed integration of GenAI in only refining document formatting. This approach aligned with broader calls in the literature to embed ethical digital literacy in curriculum design, rather than treat GenAI as a compliance issue alone (Fawns, 2022).

Although the five-tier model offered strong pedagogical value, staff found it hard to implement, particularly when distinguishing between tiers and designing assessments amid rapidly evolving GenAI developments. Some viewed the model as too complex, and it was difficult to explain to students. However, it shifted SCU's perspective on GenAI, from risk to resource, influencing policy development. The model underscored the need for GenAI policy to align with assessment reform, staff development, and student engagement, paving the way for a more practical, pedagogically driven approach.

## Current Approach at SCU

In preparation for a university-wide rollout in Term 2, May 2025, Southern Cross University introduced a refined policy framework to guide the use of GenAI in assessment tasks. Replacing the previous five-tier model, the three-level model is designed to offer a balance between clarity, flexibility and integrity. The model aims to align assessment practice with the growing presence of GenAI tools in educational and professional settings while preserving SCU's institutional focus on student-centred, ethical learning. The three-level model categorises assessment tasks into one of three levels.

- Level 1 – Full GenAI Use: Students may use GenAI tools without restriction across all elements of the task. Emphasis is placed on transparency, accuracy, referencing and evaluative judgment.
- Level 2 – Purpose-Specific GenAI Use: Students may use GenAI for explicitly permitted purposes only, such as brainstorming, editing or data analysis. Staff must provide detailed guidance and outline expectations in the assessment brief. This is the most frequently used category.
- Level 3 – No GenAI Use: GenAI is not permitted within the final assessment artifact, though it may be used in preparation. This applies primarily to in-person, professional, invigilated or exempted assessments for preparatory units.

Unlike prior models, the current model is embedded in the formal assessment infrastructure. Each assessment brief includes a dedicated section indicating the GenAI level, a guidance statement, any evidence requirements, including a mandatory student declaration. As part of the ongoing culture of improvement, Level 3 was further revised to include an exemption statement recognising the need for preparatory students to develop academic writing skills. This approach is designed to normalise GenAI as part of academic practice while promoting accountability and pedagogical intent. To shift the ownership of the use of GenAI back to the students, each student must submit a GenAI acknowledgment statement for their work, which is guided by the GenAI Tool Use Descriptors. The statement is described below.

'I acknowledge that I knowingly [did / did not] use Generative AI tools in the completion of this assignment. If used, the tool(s) I used were [List Tools Here] I used them for the purpose(s) of [List Uses Here] I confirm that any use of AI was, ethical, and in support of my own learning, and that the final submission reflects my original understanding, effort and is demonstrably my own work.'

This approach is intended to encourage honesty and transparency, making students more aware of their responsibilities regarding academic integrity. By reflecting on how they use GenAI, students are prompted to think critically about their own learning process and the boundaries of acceptable use. Additionally, it helps educators understand how GenAI is being used in coursework, which can inform future teaching and assessment practices.

**Supporting staff through descriptor use guidelines**

While the GenAI Tool Use Descriptors offer clarity to students, teaching staff showed an early interest in exploring the topic further about how to implement Level 2. In response, CTL developed six the GenAI Descriptor Use Guidelines, which provide detailed, assessment-type-specific scaffolding for staff. This guide includes a matrix of permitted use cases across assessment types (written, visual, oral, practical, and collaborative) and examples of best practice. It outlines how to document evidence of GenAI use, when required, and how to articulate task-specific expectations with precision.

Importantly, these guidelines were not developed in isolation. The Level 2 guidance was informed by the literature on GenAI ethics, student evaluative judgment and integration frameworks (Nikolic et al., 2025; Quince & Nikolic, 2025). Quince and Nikolic (2025) developed a 32-item taxonomy of social, economic and environmental implications of GenAI use, drawing from empirical student responses to scaffolded assessment (Quince et al., 2024b). This work revealed that students are more likely to identify benefits than risks, underscoring the need for the guidelines to provide scaffolding to student learning. Nikolic et al. (2025) developed a comprehensive framework for the integration of project-based learning units. This framework informed the development of guidelines for the specific ways students may use GenAI in their studies. These insights and guidelines have influenced SCU's approach to GenAI education and policy development by offering a comprehensive framework for integrating AI ethics and practical applications into their curriculum through the GenAI Tool Use Descriptors. SCU's policy approach reflects recent national and international literature advocating for contextualised, educative models of GenAI integration (AAIN, 2023; Dawson, 2020). At its core is the principle that assessment policies must not only mitigate risk but also support the development of transferable, future-facing capabilities.

## Conclusions & Next Steps

Southern Cross University's three-level GenAI model offers a practical response to evolving technology, blending clarity, flexibility, and academic integrity. The framework supports appropriate GenAI use for both students and staff, backed by policy, learning resources, and sector guidance. University-wide implementation starts in Term 2, 2025, with professional learning and peer discussions helping staff apply the model. Early feedback shows the framework provides structure while allowing disciplinary discretion, though attention is needed to support student literacy skills essential for academic success. The model will be assessed over the next six months, drawing feedback from staff forums, professional development, and student evaluations. While the model may evolve, it provides a strong, adaptable foundation for future developments.

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