Let it break: What fractures reveal about the future of assessment in the age of GenAI

Justine Maldon
Edith Cowan University

Michelle Pedlow
University of Western Australia

Rebecca Scriven
Edith Cowan University

The emergence of generative AI has not broken assessment systems in higher education; it has exposed long-standing fractures. Overly complex tasks, excessive assessment demands and staff overload point to a system that has privileged compliance over human connection. This position paper acknowledges that brokenness but looks beyond it. Inspired by the Japanese art of Kintsugi, where cracks are repaired with gold, we ask: what if these fractures are openings for stronger, more relational practices to emerge? Adopting an autoethnographic lens, we draw on our experiences in curriculum design, academic leadership and learning support during a period of rapid change. We argue that trust is foundational in assessment design, enacted through dialogue, feedback, collaboration, and willingness to take risks. While the system may be under strain, the people are not broken. Designing with trust enables the reimagination of integrity. The future of assessment lies in transformation – built differently and built together.

Keywords: Assessment reform, generative AI, curriculum design, higher education, autoethnographic

Introduction: The Crack Appears

In the Japanese practice of Kintsugi, broken pottery is repaired with gold, highlighting the cracks rather than concealing the damage (Keulemans, 2016). The restored pottery visibly displays its history, becoming stronger at the fracture point because of the break (Keulemans, 2016). This metaphor offers a lens through which to view the current moment in higher education: a crack that demands attention. Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has illuminated existing fractures in the system, presenting both a challenge and an opportunity to reflect on what holds it together. It has been widely framed as a disruptive force in education (Lodge et al., 2023), but disruption alone does not break a system. Rather, it reveals where the system is already under strain. GenAI has surfaced long-standing fractures in assessment practice: over-standardised tasks, rigid rubrics, surveillance-oriented policies, and a culture that treats integrity as something to regulate (Perkins et al., 2024). These cracks were exposed by GenAI. The sector's response has been predictable: detection tools, stricter assessment templates and deterrence-focused messaging. The instinct was control, but control does not equal integrity (Corbin et al., 2025). A narrow regulatory focus has overshadowed the real issues reflecting a system that privileges compliance over human connection.

From our positions within higher education, the brittle nature of assessment practice came as no surprise. Michelle is leading the design of a new Bachelor program grounded in programmatic assessment, feedback literacy, and authentic learning, strengthening assessment integrity through trust, not just compliance. Rebecca works with teaching teams and oversees learning integrity and academic quality, where institutional priorities around compliance, risk, and care require constant negotiation. Justine partners with educators to embed skills across curricula and supports students from diverse backgrounds to succeed. In our roles, we have witnessed the emotional and relational labour required to sustain assessment systems often misaligned with values of trust, learning and human connection. We write from within the system, as practitioners experiencing its contradictions and possibilities. This paper adopts an autoethnographic stance to explore how broader systemic dynamics play out in practice. Autoethnography connects personal experience with cultural and institutional structures (Ellis et al., 2011). Reflections from daily conversations, design dilemmas and invisible emotional labour constitute evidence beyond the anecdotal. This paper offers both reflection and

provocation: if current assessment models no longer fit the GenAI era, what comes next? We argue that the gold binding broken pieces is not new tools or policies, it is people. Staff who redesign with care, students who navigate complexity with authenticity, and teams building something stronger than before.

Fragments: The Emotional Cost of Holding a Broken System

GenAI's disruption of assessment practices surfaced deep-rooted vulnerabilities that were already present in the sector. This paper draws on contemporary scholarship to explore these fractures, reframing them as signs of misalignment between institutional systems and the human needs of those who enact them. It argues for trust as a core design principle in assessment renewal (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2018). Often framed as a threat to assessment validity (Corbin et al., 2025), GenAI has instead acted as a catalyst, prompting a reckoning with practices no longer fit for purpose. As Corbin et al. (2025) note, the key lies in aligning assessment with what is genuinely valued and what it seeks to measure. This moment invites a shift in focus from reactive risk management to proactive reimagining of learning, feedback and assessment practices (Pedlow & Boud, 2025). GenAI presents an opportunity to rethink the assumption that students cheat to reduce their cognitive load. In reality, current assessment design often makes it easy to outsource work to GenAI. When assessment is built on trust, students are more likely to self-check, revise and reflect (Corbin et al., 2025). Perkins et al. (2024) call for a move beyond prioritising plagiarism detection to designing assessments that foster authenticity, engagement, and meaningful learning. Higher education has long drifted toward over-assessment (Jessop & Tomas, 2017), limiting space for dialogic feedback, iteration, and the development of evaluative judgement (Nieminen et al., 2022). GenAI invites educators to revisit a fundamental question: what kind of learning should assessment support? *As* Boud and Associates (2010) argue, assessment must be reimagined as a lifelong process that builds students' capacity to navigate complexity and change.

Yet structural misalignments persist in how universities require educators to assess students and respond to academic integrity. Compliance-driven approaches, often focused on detection and punishment, have long eroded trust and created adversarial learning environments (Bretag et al., 2019). GenAI has amplified these tendencies, with some institutions defaulting to restrictive policies rather than investing in pedagogical redesign (Ellis & Murdoch, 2024; Gonsalves, 2025). Meanwhile, increasing workloads and emotional labour continue to affect staff wellbeing. As McNaughton-Cassill et al. (2023) argue, burnout is not a matter of individual resilience but a structural issue rooted in system design. Meaningful assessment reform in the GenAI era requires more than new tools or technologies (Corbin et al., 2025); it demands a collective commitment to rebuild on principles of trust, transparency, and care – for both learners and educators.

Academic burnout is gaining recognition across universities, though research to date has largely focused on schoolteachers. Despite perceptions of flexibility, academic roles often encroach on personal time through teaching, research and administration – fuelling stress, imbalance and role conflict (Yıldırım & Şenel, 2023). These pressures are both systemic and relational. Ross et al. (2023) cite publishing demands, restructuring and the lingering impacts of COVID-19, arguing that resilience depends more on organisational support than individual traits. Jayman et al. (2022) link burnout to neoliberal reforms – massification, marketisation, and metrics – which disproportionately affect untenured and caregiving staff. Khan et al. (2019) call for coordinated policy responses. Together, these studies highlight the need for systemic reform that reduces bureaucracy, supports leadership, and prioritises staff wellbeing. Kintsugi offers more than metaphor; it is a lens for redesigning assessment systems that embrace fracture as opportunity. Treating cracks as data, not defects, reveals the human toll of current assessment regimes and invites us to rebuild with care. Fractures can provide the opportunity to scaffold more honest, human-centred assessment architectures.

The Gold: People as the Binding Force

If cracks in the system are visible, the question is not whether we need to respond, it is *how*. While the sector continues to focus on academic integrity practices to address the assessment security concerns, we believe the most powerful repair work begins with those designing the assessments. Restoring integrity and meaning in assessment is relational work (Ajjawi et al., 2024), built through trust: in learners, in colleagues, and in ourselves to lead change under imperfect conditions. We have experienced this firsthand in our roles.

Michelle reflects on leading curriculum strategy and innovation in the redesign of a new Bachelor's degree:
> *At our institution, no one has walked the path of programmatic assessment before. In designing a new curriculum around this framework, we've found ourselves at the edge of policy, pushing into spaces that demand change which is necessary and inevitable in the age of GenAI. What we're building stretches beyond what our systems were designed to hold. But we've chosen innovation over fear, guided by TEQSA's*

signals toward more integrated, future-ready assessment. What's carried us through isn't certainty - it's trust. Trust that students will engage with feedback because we've built the scaffolding to make it possible. Trust that educators will grow into roles as facilitators, coaches, and companions in learning. And trust that assessment can reclaim its place as a space for growth, not surveillance. The rise of GenAI made the cracks impossible to ignore. Instead of covering them, we've chosen to work with them - using programmatic assessment for learning to fill the gaps with something stronger. Like Kintsugi, this is not about restoring the old. It's about renewal, shaped with care and intention. We're looking ahead to the world our students will enter, and we're building something different, and more human, for their future.

Rebecca reflects on the intersection of academic quality and curriculum design:

After many years working with academics on curriculum and assessment design, one thing remains true: the fundamentals of good assessment still matter. But with GenAI in the picture, we're being asked to look again. The challenge is no longer just about designing assessments; it's about rethinking the purpose of assessment itself. I encourage academics to imagine what assessments could be – authentic, connected and holistic – rather than getting stuck on the usual constraints of workload and budgets. It's about shifting the lens back to the student experience and designing with humans. This design work is deeply relational requiring us to reimagine assessment in the context of GenAI, let go of past ways, and foster trust. It means encouraging academics to work together across units, to co-design assessments that reflect cumulative learning and transferable skills. It's not easy, but when space is made for creativity, shared purpose and a willingness to reframe GenAI as a partner rather than a threat, new possibilities start to emerge.

Justine reflects on supporting students and staff regarding academic integrity, learning and teaching practice:

As higher education faces increasing fragmentation, rising academic misconduct and uncertainty about GenAI, our roles are evolving. We work with students and staff during moments of tension and confusion – experiences that, while challenging, offer unexpected opportunities for growth, connection and shared understanding. We have learned to reimagine these interactions as relational, rather than disciplinary. By reframing learning about misconduct as an invitation to explore responsible GenAI use and engage with dialogic feedback and metacognition, we can foster evaluative judgement and self-regulated learning. This shift of emphasis from judgement to dialogue helps to repair trust. Staff often express anxiety about the expectation to be GenAI experts, yet many students are similarly new to GenAI. This shared uncertainty presents a valuable opportunity: staff need not position themselves as all-knowing authorities but can model collaborative discovery alongside students. The fissures in our systems reveal space for reconnection – more human, with greater curiosity and care. They also highlight opportunities to reconceptualise assessment and learning support as curriculum-integrated, scalable approaches that build capabilities in communication, critical thinking, feedback and GenAI literacies. Crucially, this includes professional learning for staff to support this shift. This is what designing together looks like: moving assessments beyond transactions into relationships that support learning and build capabilities for navigating change.

A common thread through these accounts is a commitment to intentionally build trust in this era of continuous change. In times of uncertainty, trust needs to be deliberately designed, modelled, and sustained through relational practice. Within educational reform, psychological safety enables staff and students to share uncertainty, seek support, and experiment – essential for meaningful change. Psychological safety entails creating environments where people feel safe to speak up, take risks, and admit mistakes without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 2018). Designing for trust goes beyond reform; it is cultivated through small, deliberate practices that weave collaboration into the fabric of learning. When assessment and feedback are designed to be safe, inclusive and supportive, students are more likely to engage, reflect, and take ownership of their learning. Such environments foster self-regulation in a GenAI era (Kelly et al., 2025). Carless and Winstone (2023) highlight feedback literacy as equally critical, enabling students to engage with and act on feedback as active participants. When feedback feels fair, timely and tailored, students are more inclined to trust the process and see it as supportive, not punitive (Carless & Winstone, 2023). Building trust does not require grand gestures, it grows through everyday practices. The micro-practices below embed trust into daily design and teaching decisions. Though seemingly small, each shift destabilises hierarchical, control-oriented norms and promotes transparency, co-agency, and reflection. Together, psychological safety, trust and feedback literacy create the relational conditions for assessment systems grounded in integrity, responsiveness, and shared commitment to learning.

In navigating this changing landscape, we have found ourselves returning to a simple question: what kind of assessment culture are we cultivating – one of fear, or one of partnership? The answer lies in the everyday practices we choose. Guiding principles for everyday practice might include:

1. Make the process visible: Share the *why* behind assessment criteria and feedback loops so learners can align effort with purpose rather than second-guess hidden standards.
2. Invite reflexivity: Build in moments where students and staff articulate how feedback, peer exchange or digital tools (including GenAI) have shaped their thinking.
3. Model uncertainty: Use language like 'Let's explore this together' to normalise experimentation and reduce performative pressure.
4. Create space for dialogue: Protect time for conversations that surface values and concerns – alignment emerges when people feel heard, not hurried.

These practices shift the tone from surveillance to partnership, and from compliance to co-agency, repairing the assessment culture through transparency, mutual respect and shared ownership of learning.

Restoration: Reimagining Assessment through Trust

The impulse to respond to disruption with control is understandable in a sector under pressure. But control driven by fear stifles possibility. GenAI has exposed more than misconduct concerns; it has surfaced deeper discomfort with uncertainty. The instinct to 'cheat-proof' assessment may offer short-term reassurance, but it risks entrenching mistrust. What if we met this moment with curiosity and care? What if we approached trust as a practical design principle – centred on dialogue, shared responsibility and respect for learners as ethical participants? Abandoning rigid compliance does not mean lowering standards; it means shaping them collaboratively with the educators who enact them. Designing assessment around trust shifts the question from *how do we catch misconduct?* to *how do we support learning and meaning making?* This moves assessment beyond transactions into relationships. As Bearman and Ajjawi (2018) and Carless and Winstone (2023) emphasise, meaningful assessment is co-constructed and made valuable through interaction. Embedding feedback literacy, reflective practice, and formative uses of GenAI functions as a set of trust-building mechanisms, signalling to students that assessment is a space where they are seen, supported, and expected to grow.

Kintsugi teaches us that repair means making breaks visible and honouring them as part of the object's history. We believe the same applies to assessment in higher education. The fractures now visible – exposed by GenAI – tell stories of overwork, disconnection, and misalignment. But they also reveal opportunity. Previous approaches may no longer be fit for purpose, calling for a commitment to build assessment systems based on trust, informed by feedback, and responsive to change (Pedlow & Boud, 2025). As Brown and Sambell (2023) argue, assessment security is best achieved through authenticity and tasks that matter; those that reflect real-world thinking. If we design for meaning rather than control, for dialogue rather than direction, we can move beyond repair to transform. When staff receive time, space, and trust to redesign assessment collaboratively, the work shifts from compliance to shared agency. What emerges is more authentic, more human, and more enduring than what came before. The true value lies in the people who engage with the technology, and they are ready to lead, adapt, and transform.

Conclusion: Stronger Because of the Break

The cracks in higher education assessment systems are now impossible to ignore. While GenAI did not cause these fractures, it has illuminated them, bringing long-standing tensions around authenticity, equity, and academic integrity into sharp focus. We stand at a critical juncture, not to restore what was, but to imagine what could be. This moment calls for more than technical fixes; it demands assessment systems grounded in trust, collaboration, and care. Rather than defaulting to a paradigm of risk management and control, we are invited to reframe our approach – from closing gaps to opening conversations, from compliance to meaningful engagement. Kintsugi offers a powerful metaphor: value lies in embracing imperfections as part of the story. In this context, the gold is not found in new technologies or policy instruments, but in people. Educators who challenge outdated norms, students navigating uncertainty with integrity, and teams redesigning assessment with courage and compassion, all represent the human in institutional renewal. Our task is thoughtful reassembly toward assessment systems that reflect current realities and future possibilities.

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