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Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Between risk and reform: Learning designers' experiences of institutional responses to GenAI in assessment

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Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has prompted universities to reconsider how assessment can remain meaningful, valid and fit for an AI-integrated future. While institutional responses to GenAI are often framed as technical, policy or academic integrity challenges, they are also deeply human organisational change challenges, shaped by competing logics of risk, reform, infrastructure and operational efficiency. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 11 learning designers (LDs) from six Australian and New Zealand universities, the paper addresses the following research question: How do LDs experience and navigate institutional responses to GenAI in assessment in higher education? The analysis identified five interrelated themes: navigating strategic ambiguity and policy lag; mediating compliance-driven and integrity-focused responses; translating GenAI disruption into assessment reform; bridging AI infrastructure and pedagogical practice; and advocating for educational purpose within operational constraints. The paper contributes to current debates on GenAI and assessment by shifting attention from assessment tasks and technologies to the institutional conditions that shape assessment change. It argues that in addition to policy statements and enterprise AI platforms, sustainable responses to GenAI require coordinated professional development, curriculum governance processes enabling timely change, and stronger recognition of LDs as strategic partners whose pedagogical expertise, institutional knowledge and change leadership are central to assessment transformation.

Keywords: Generative AI, assessment design, learning designers, higher education, institutional change, qualitative study

Introduction

GenAI has placed renewed pressure on assessment in higher education. It has intensified concerns about academic integrity and validity while also prompting deeper reflection on the purposes of assessment, the nature of student learning, and the role of human judgement. Since the public release of widely accessible GenAI tools, universities are being challenged to reconsider how assessment can meaningfully capture learning in an AI-integrated educational environment. In response to GenAI, universities have sought to protect assessment integrity through the development of GenAI policies and clearer rules about acceptable use due to the limitations of AI detection tools, and reverting to traditional invigilated examinations (Babai, 2024). Luo's (2024) critical review of GenAI policies in higher education shows that although policies mention several issues such as reliability of AI outputs and unequal access to GenAI, the dominant problem represented is that students may not submit original work for assessment. GenAI invites a broader reconsideration of assessment design, including authentic, process-oriented and AI-aware assessment practices that develop students' evaluative judgement (Bearman et al., 2024), disciplinary capability and ethical engagement with digital tools. From this

perspective, assessment reform is not only a technical response to a new technology, but also a pedagogical and organisational challenge.

This challenge is particularly complex because institutional responses to GenAI are shaped by competing logics of risk, reform, infrastructure and operational efficiency. Universities must manage academic integrity risks, meet regulatory expectations, support staff and students to develop their information literacy skills needed to work in an AI-integrated world, invest in secure digital infrastructure, and maintain scalable assessment systems within existing workload and governance constraints. Corbin et al. (2025) describe AI and assessment as a *wicked problem* because it cannot be solved through a single assessment model, policy setting or technological intervention. Instead, responses are situated, contested and dependent on institutional culture, disciplinary context, assessment purpose and available resources. This complexity means that assessment redesign in the age of GenAI requires not only new tools and policies, but also forms of mediation, translation, and collaboration across institutional domains.

Emerging literature on the integration of GenAI into pedagogical practice has identified significant gaps between institutional guidance and classroom practice. For example, exploring how educators in Australian higher education are incorporating GenAI into their teaching, Jha and Atif (2025) argued that while Australian universities have developed GenAI policies, in reality educators frequently shoulder the burden of interpreting broad or restrictive policies which distracts them from their core teaching responsibilities and increases their cognitive and emotional labour. Additionally, the inconsistent messaging about the policies have caused confusion among students regarding permissible uses of GenAI (Jha & Atif, 2025). Despite these insights, the practical response of universities to GenAI from the perspective of Learning Designers (LDs) remains largely unexplored. This represents a significant research gap, as LDs play a key role in implementing institutional responses to Gen AI and "lead both systemic change and targeted support for educators, navigating a complex digital and cultural shift" (Henry & Hansen, 2025). In higher education their work can be understood through the notion of *third space,* where professional and academic responsibilities intersect across formal organisational boundaries (Whitchurch, 2008; White et al., 2016). Their role requires hybrid pedagogical, technological and relational expertise (Henderson et al., 2026). Despite their central role in supporting technology-enhanced learning and teaching, LDs' perspectives remain under-represented in research on institutional responses to GenAI and assessment. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the research question: How do LDs experience and navigate institutional responses to GenAI in assessment in higher education?

Methodology

The current study adopted a qualitative research design. It focused on LDs who are often positioned at the intersection of academic practice, institutional policy, digital learning infrastructure and assessment design. This positioning enables them to provide insight into how institutional responses to GenAI are translated into practice and how educators are supported to navigate emerging assessment challenges. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 11 LDs working in six Australian and New Zealand universities. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate for this study because they enabled participants to describe their experiences in depth while allowing the researchers to explore emerging issues across different institutional contexts. To protect confidentiality, identifying details of participants and institutions were removed or replaced with pseudonyms. Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved repeated reading of transcripts, researcher memoing, inductive coding, and iterative development and refinement of themes across the dataset. Attention was given to both semantic meanings, including participants' explicit accounts of institutional responses to GenAI, and latent meanings, including the underlying tensions, assumptions and organisational logics shaping those responses. Themes were reviewed through critical dialogue among the research team, checked against the wider dataset, and refined to ensure they captured coherent patterns of meaning relevant to the research question. This process supported an interpretive analysis of how LDs made sense of institutional responses to GenAI in assessment and of the conditions that enabled or constrained assessment change.

Findings and discussion

Findings suggest that universities have responded to the emergence of GenAI in diverse and evolving ways. LDs in this study described a sector marked by strategic ambiguity, reactive policy development, and uneven implementation. Some universities positioned GenAI as a catalyst for innovation, while others reacted defensively, emphasising control, compliance, or delay. These differences revealed both the fragmented nature of institutional governance and the tensions between pedagogical ideals and operational realities.

Five interrelated themes captured how LDs experienced and navigated institutional responses to GenAI in assessment: navigating strategic ambiguity and policy lag; mediating compliance-driven and integrity-focused responses; translating GenAI disruption into assessment reform; bridging AI infrastructure and pedagogical practice; and advocating for educational purpose within operational constraints.

Navigating strategic ambiguity and policy lag

Across the six institutions, LDs described an early period of strategic ambiguity, when their universities were slow to articulate formal positions on AI in teaching and assessment. This delay left some staff uncertain about expectations and hesitant to act. Presenting the perspectives of the majority of the LDs (eight out of 11), Leo observed, “There was a vacuum of policy and guidance in terms of direction for staff about what to do. And I think a lot of the responsibility ended up falling on the individual academics to try and figure out what to do.”

The interviews suggested that in the absence of central guidance, teaching staff improvised their own frameworks and practices, resulting in what Leo called “very inconsistent experiences with students.” Some banned AI outright; others encouraged exploration. From the perspective of seven of the LDs, this variability reflected broader institutional uncertainty: universities were aware of the disruption but unable to provide timely leadership. The resulting patchwork of practices placed pressure on LDs, who were often asked to interpret shifting institutional expectations while supporting anxious staff. Their work involved sense-making and local stabilisation, supporting teaching staff to make defensible decisions in conditions of uncertainty. This period of ambiguity highlights how policy lag can undermine coherence and equity in students’ learning experiences, even as it opens space for local experimentation, echoing Jha and Atif’s (2025) observation that inconsistent institutional communication creates confusion for both staff and students regarding appropriate GenAI use.

Mediating compliance and integrity-driven responses

In the majority of the institutions (five out of six), early responses were shaped less by pedagogical reflection than by concerns about academic integrity and regulatory compliance. Universities introduced AI detection tools, reaffirmed exam-based assessment, and framed GenAI primarily as a risk to be contained. Kyle described this reaction vividly: “The biggest problem I have right now is a relatively young firebrand in one particular department who wants to go back to the way things were done…back to paper, and only doing mid-sems…and exams…and that way we get to disregard AI.” Such responses reflected a desire for control among some lecturers and simplicity amid uncertainty, yet they also reinforced traditional assessment models and constrained opportunities for innovation.

LDs often reported finding themselves mediating between these institutional impulses for security and surveillance and teaching staff’s interest in authentic, future-oriented assessment. Their work in this context involved navigating the tension between institutional demands for risk management and the need for pedagogically defensible assessment in an AI-integrated environment. For many (nine out of 11 LDs), integrity-focused measures represented a step backwards, reasserting standardisation rather than fostering pedagogical adaptation. This reactive stance can indicate how some institutional responses to disruption may prioritise risk management over learning transformation.

Leveraging AI for strategic reform

In contrast, some institutions used AI as a strategic catalyst to accelerate long-standing educational reforms. In these cases, GenAI became an opportunity to revisit the coherence, purpose, and authenticity of assessment practices across programs.

A prominent example described by four LDs from three universities was a programmatic assessment initiative that restructured assessment at the course and faculty levels. Susan explained that this reform involved "a whole-of-course review, right from the course learning outcomes down to the last assessment task the student does." She elaborated that each course was being examined in terms of "how AI is used within…each and every assessment task. Do we teach them? Do we guide them? Do we allow them? Do we stop them?" The initiative also included a "reduction in assessment tasks" and reflection on "why are we doing it?"

This example illustrates how these universities used AI as a lever for holistic review, rather than as a problem to be contained. Such efforts reframed AI as part of a broader agenda for program coherence, digital literacy, and authentic learning. Here, LDs were instrumental, in partnership with teaching staff, in translating the strategic vision into actionable pedagogical design. Their work involved helping teaching staff move from general concerns about AI use toward concrete decisions about assessment purpose, sequencing, guidance, authenticity and student capability development. In this sense, LDs linked institutional change with course-level innovation.

Bridging AI infrastructure and pedagogical practice

Another dimension of institutional response involved investment in enterprise-level AI infrastructure. These initiatives aimed to provide secure, university-supported environments for staff and students to engage with AI tools, signalling a shift from defensive to facilitative strategies. Leo described one such transition:

> We had Microsoft Copilot. It was the only enterprise-supported tool for staff and students. But then in August, our enterprise IT team switched on Google Gemini and Notebook LM, and added that into our enterprise toolkit. So, we went from one enterprise tool to three.

These investments were often framed by five LDs from four universities as commitments to ethical and secure adoption, offering alternatives to publicly available tools that raised privacy and intellectual property concerns. However, LDs noted that providing access to the institutional tools did not automatically translate into pedagogical innovation enacted by teaching staff. Without parallel investment in professional learning and policy clarity, staff engagement remained uneven.

For some LDs (three out of 11), the rollout of enterprise AI tools represented a significant symbolic and operational turning point—a move toward institutional acceptance and infrastructure-building that aligned AI adoption with broader digital strategy agendas. However, it also created a further layer of translation work. LDs needed to bridge the gap between institutional provision of AI tools and meaningful educational uptake, supporting staff to understand not only which tools were available, but how those tools could be aligned with learning outcomes, assessment design and student capability development.

Balancing educational and operational priorities

Across all six institutions, LDs identified persistent tensions between educational aspirations and operational imperatives. Eight LDs described that while many teaching staff and LDs advocated for assessment approaches that were authentic, student-centred, and AI-aware, institutional priorities often emphasised efficiency, scalability, and compliance. Noah captured this dynamic bluntly: "What it ultimately comes down to is that the financial imperative from both the central university and the faculty outweighs the actual value of the degree, or the learning…and therefore, the nature of the assessments." He linked the return to exam-based assessment directly to resource pressures, observing that "this is also part of the reason why we're seeing a lot of people move back to the exams." Noah also reflected on the bureaucratic constraints that slowed pedagogical adaptation: "I'm very much struggling to understand my identity and my role in all this because the people who want to make changes are hamstrung by the need to make amendments to a handbook entry 12 months before

it goes into effect." His frustration reflects how institutional rigidity can stifle innovation, even when motivation and expertise exist at the local level.

These tensions underscore a core paradox: universities recognise the need for assessment reform, but systemic structures, including curriculum governance, workload models, and risk frameworks, often inhibit the agility required for meaningful change. LDs operate at this intersection, advocating for pedagogical integrity (Henry & Hansen, 2025) within systems designed primarily for operational stability. Their work involves sustaining attention to educational purpose, student learning and assessment authenticity even when institutional processes privilege scalability, efficiency and risk reduction.

Implications

The findings have implications for universities, LDs and broader approaches to assessment change in the age of GenAI. For universities, the study suggests that effective responses to GenAI require more than policy statements, detection tools, and enterprise-level AI platforms. While these responses may be necessary, they are insufficient if they are not accompanied by coordinated professional learning opportunities for staff, clear assessment guidance and curriculum governance processes that enable timely pedagogical adaptation. Extending Jha and Atif's (2025) call for systemic and coordinated approaches to GenAI integration, we argue that rather than positioning compliance and reform as competing agendas, institutions need to create conditions in which assessment reform can be undertaken at the program level, with attention to coherence, authenticity, student learning, equity, and future professional practice.

For LDs, the findings highlight the expanding strategic nature of their work. LDs are not only supporting individual teaching staff with assessment tasks; they are also interpreting institutional ambiguity, mediating tensions between academic integrity and educational innovation, translating broad GenAI policies into meaningful assessment practices, and bridging the gap between AI infrastructure and pedagogical use. This suggests a need for institutions to recognise LDs as strategic partners in assessment transformation rather than as operational support staff. Their expertise in pedagogy, technology, curriculum design and academic collaboration positions them to contribute to program-level and institution-wide responses to GenAI. However, this contribution depends on LDs being included early in policy, governance and implementation processes, rather than being asked to translate decisions after they have already been made.
For the broader field of technology-enhanced learning, this study reinforces the importance of understanding GenAI as an organisational and pedagogical challenge, not simply a technical one. Institutional investment in AI infrastructure may provide secure access to tools, but it does not automatically lead to effective assessment redesign. Sustainable change depends on the alignment of policy, infrastructure, professional learning, workload, governance and educational purpose. The findings therefore point to the need for more connected approaches to GenAI implementation, in which technological adoption is integrated with assessment scholarship, staff capability building, institutional change processes and the professional expertise of those who support curriculum and assessment design.

Conclusion

This paper examined how 11 LDs have experienced and navigated institutional responses to GenAI in assessment in higher education. The findings show that the six universities' responses are diverse and uneven, shaped by competing logics of risk, reform, infrastructure and operational efficiency. Across the institutions, LDs described strategic ambiguity, reactive compliance, opportunities for program-level reform, investment in enterprise AI tools, and persistent tensions between educational aspirations and operational realities.

The paper affirms that institutional responses to GenAI are not simply technical or policy problems. They are organisational change problems that require careful mediation between academic integrity, pedagogical innovation, digital infrastructure and institutional governance. LDs occupy a critical position within this contested space. They support teaching staff to navigate uncertainty, translate emerging policy into practice, and advocate for more coherent, authentic and AI-aware assessment design.

By foregrounding LDs' perspectives, this paper contributes to current debates about GenAI and assessment by shifting attention from individual assessment tasks and technologies to the institutional conditions that shape assessment change. As universities continue to respond to GenAI, recognising and enabling the strategic role of LDs will be valuable for moving beyond reactive responses and towards assessment practices that are educationally meaningful, sustainable and fit for an AI-integrated future.

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