# Belfast universities turn AI challenge into a testbed for responsible education



While Stormont debates budgets and Belfast’s tourist trail draws crowds, a quieter transformation is unfolding on the city’s campuses: students and staff are learning to live with, shape and regulate powerful generative AI tools. According to the *Belfast News Letter*, the shift is no longer just about plagiarism but about software that can mimic human writing so convincingly that markers question whether they are assessing student learning or the AI’s skill at imitation.

At Queen’s University Belfast, literature professor Dr Sean O’Kane described successive essays from the same student that “read like different authors” despite flawless citations and coherent arguments. At Ulster University, 62 per cent of surveyed academics suspected they had graded AI-assisted work this term without being able to prove it.

Those experiences mirror national findings. A University of Reading study submitted AI-generated essays to undergraduate assessments; most were not identified as machine-produced and several scored at or above cohort averages. The researchers urged redesign of assessments and staff training to counter sophisticated generative tools.

The scale of AI use is substantial. A Higher Education Policy Institute survey found around nine in ten UK undergraduates had used generative AI in assessments in the past year, mainly to explain concepts, summarise material or draft ideas. That prevalence means universities must balance legitimate, learning-enhancing uses with curbing over-reliance.

Belfast’s universities have begun to respond. Queen’s updated its academic integrity guidance for 2024–25, advising on AI acknowledgement and providing resources for staff and students. Ulster’s student guide clarifies permitted uses, embeds generative tools within its misconduct framework and requires acknowledgements in submissions. Both treat their policies as “living” documents.

Departments are also rethinking assessment. Queen’s computer science faculty now requires students to declare AI use and explain their editing and learning process, with oral exams piloted for final-year projects. Professor Alan McKittrick cited a student using AI to overcome dyslexia as an example of “AI as collaborator, not ghostwriter”.

Assistive potential is clearest in disability support. The Associated Press has noted that chatbots and predictive writing tools can provide personalised help at scale, though experts warn that unchecked reliance could impede skill development.

Detection technology remains an imperfect safeguard. An arXiv study of 14 detection tools found high error rates and a bias towards classifying texts as human, reinforcing warnings that automated detection alone is too weak for misconduct cases. Experts recommend layered approaches combining human judgement, redesigned assessments and transparent student practice.

Local industry is part of the mix. Belfast firms are developing dialect-sensitive detection tools and AI tutors, with reported venture funding of £2.3 million last quarter. One start-up, WritePath, markets an AI tutor that supports analysis rather than replacement of work.

The combination of guidance, redesigned assessments, student engagement and local tech innovation offers a model for responsible adoption. Both Reading researchers and HEPI recommend the steps Belfast institutions are already taking: staff training, templates for transparent acknowledgement and resilient assessment formats.

If Queen’s and Ulster can uphold academic standards while extending inclusive access to assistive AI, they could help position the UK as a leader in AI for education. As final-year psychology student Declan Moore told the *Belfast News Letter*, an AI assistant “is like having a tutor available 24/7” — so long as the final voice is the student’s. The challenge for institutions is to scale that benefit ethically and sustainably, ensuring innovation enhances learning rather than replacing it.

Created by [Amplify](https://www.hbmadvisory.com/amplify): AI-augmented, human-curated content.

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/read-this/belfasts-silent-revolution-how-ai-tools-are-reshaping-education-behind-closed-doors-5263794> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/jun/26/researchers-fool-university-markers-with-ai-generated-exam-papers> - Researchers at the University of Reading carried out an experiment in which they secretly submitted essays generated by ChatGPT‑4 to their own undergraduate assessments. Markers evaluated thirty‑three AI‑produced submissions as if they were student work and failed to identify most as machine generated; only one entry was flagged. Many AI answers received marks at or above the cohort average. The researchers concluded that current marking practices and existing detection methods are vulnerable to sophisticated generative models. The paper urged universities to redesign assessments, train staff, and develop policies that recognise the growing prevalence of AI in student work globally too.
3. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/nine-10-uk-undergraduates-now-using-ai-assessments-survey> - A Higher Education Policy Institute survey reported that roughly nine out of ten UK undergraduates have used generative AI in assessments over the past year. The poll of more than a thousand students found a steep rise in AI usage compared with the previous year, with many employing tools to explain concepts, summarise material or draft ideas rather than submit unedited content. The report warned that universities must continually review assessment design and support students in using AI responsibly. It recommended nuanced institutional policies, enhanced staff training, and assessment formats resilient to indiscriminate AI use across disciplines and delivery modes.
4. <https://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/AcademicStudentAffairs/CentreforEducationalDevelopment/Frontpageredesign/News/GuidanceontheuseofAIinAssessments.html> - Queen’s University Belfast published formal guidance on the use of generative artificial intelligence in assessments, offering staff and students a framework for responsible practice. The guidance, updated for the 2024‑25 academic year, sets out expectations about academic integrity, advises how to acknowledge AI contributions, and recommends assessment design adjustments. It includes resources for staff on detection tools and for students on safe, ethical usage. Queen’s encourages transparency, provides templates and handbooks, and promotes training to help academics and learners adapt to AI‑augmented study while maintaining rigorous standards of assessment and scholarship across faculties, with discipline specific supplemental guidance available locally.
5. <https://guides.library.ulster.ac.uk/artificialintelligence> - Ulster University’s student guide on generative artificial intelligence explains permitted and prohibited uses within coursework and clarifies academic misconduct rules. The guide states students must acknowledge any AI contribution in submissions and confirms the Academic Misconduct Policy now references generative tools. It lists reasonable uses such as planning, drafting structure and proofreading while warning against relying on AI as a substitute for learning. The document highlights limitations of AI outputs, gives data security advice and offers faculty‑specific citation examples. Ulster presents the guidance as a living resource, encouraging ongoing dialogue between staff and students about AI use across curriculum areas.
6. <https://apnews.com/article/ff1f51379b3861978efb0c1334a2a953> - An AP News feature reported that artificial intelligence is increasingly used to assist students with disabilities, offering personalised support that schools currently struggle to provide at scale. Examples include chatbots and predictive writing tools that help dyslexic pupils with reading, spelling and composition, enabling them to complete tasks more independently. The piece highlights benefits alongside concerns that overreliance could impede learning, and notes regulatory attention in the US to ensure accessibility and fairness. The article described research and funding efforts aimed at improving AI assistive technologies and urged careful vetting to balance innovation with safeguards for students’ educational development continuously.
7. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2306.15666> - A multi‑author study evaluated twelve publicly available AI detection tools plus two commercial systems including Turnitin, analysing their ability to distinguish ChatGPT‑generated text from human writing. The researchers found detectors to be neither accurate nor reliable across varied samples; many tools struggled especially when authors used obfuscation or translation, and there was a bias toward classifying outputs as human written. The paper highlights high error rates and cautions against over‑reliance on automated detectors for academic misconduct investigations. The authors recommend layered approaches, continued research, transparency about tool limitations and pedagogical changes to address generative AI in education policy and practice.