The Secret Life of Students 2026
Learning to be human in an age of AI
17 March 2026, Shaw Theatre, London

Academic standards, misconduct and regulation: testing the system in practice

Session: As the line between legitimate assistance and misconduct blurs, complaints are rising and institutions are grappling with investigations that feel impossible to resolve fairly. We'll engage directly with the regulators to explore whether current frameworks are keeping pace with practice, and how institutions can build systems that maintain standards while supporting students to reach them.

CASE STUDY 1: The procedural minefield

Amara is an international postgraduate student with dyslexia. Her Disabled Students' Allowance funds assistive software including text-to-speech and a literacy support tool that suggests sentence restructuring.

Her dissertation receives a Turnitin AI detection score of 67%. She is invited to a viva four months after submission. She is not shown the detection report or told what specific passages are of concern. The viva focuses on her understanding of the theoretical framework – she struggles to recall specific details from sources used months earlier.

The dissertation contained two references that could not be located in any database. The university treats these as "hallucinated references" – strong evidence of AI use. Amara says she recorded the citations incorrectly due to the volume of sources consulted and can provide the correct sources.

The panel also cites file metadata showing the document was created two days before the deadline, suggesting it was "produced quickly." Amara explains she worked in multiple draft documents and consolidated them – her earlier drafts exist but weren't requested.

Amara provides:

- Planning notes and multiple earlier drafts showing development of her argument
- Evidence that a previous essay was also flagged but cleared – suggesting the detection tool may be biased against her writing style
- An explanation that her assistive technology may affect text patterns
- Correct sources for the "hallucinated" references

The panel upholds the allegation. Its written reasons do not engage with Amara's evidence or explain why it was rejected. The penalty – a mark of zero with capped resit – is not explained against the range of available sanctions. The panel states it "exercised academic judgment."

Amara appeals, arguing the university failed to:

- Share evidence in advance so she could prepare
- Design the viva to test her process, not just her recall after four months

- Meaningfully consider her documentary evidence
- Explain why alternative explanations for the references and metadata were rejected
- Consider whether detection is reliable for students using assistive technology or writing in a second language
- Give reasons for the penalty chosen

The university rejects the appeal on the basis that "academic judgment was properly exercised."

Discussion questions:

- What does the GPF require in terms of sharing evidence and giving students opportunity to respond?
- Is a viva testing subject recall an appropriate way to determine whether AI was used?
- Should "hallucinated references" and file metadata be treated as conclusive evidence, or do they require investigation of alternative explanations?
- Are there B2 implications if disabled students and international students aren't told how their circumstances interact with AI detection?
- Is there a discrimination risk if detection tools systematically misidentify certain writing styles?

CASE STUDY 2: The guidance gap

Josh is a first-year undergraduate. His module handbook states: "AI tools may be used to support your learning but must not be used to produce assessed work." The university's academic integrity policy states that "any use of generative AI in the production of assessed work, including idea generation" constitutes misconduct and that strict liability applies – intent is irrelevant.

In a seminar, Josh's lecturer says "using ChatGPT to check your argument structure is fine, just don't copy and paste."

Josh uses ChatGPT to brainstorm ideas, generate an outline, get feedback on his draft against the marking criteria, and suggest improvements to his conclusion. He then rewrites the conclusion himself incorporating some suggestions. He doesn't declare any AI use because he believes he "produced" the work himself – the AI helped him think, but the words are his.

Josh is asked to attend what his tutor describes as "a quick chat about your essay and how you found the assignment." He is not told this is an investigation, not shown any detection report, and not advised he can bring support or seek advice from the SU.

During the conversation, Josh mentions he "bounced ideas off ChatGPT, like talking to a study buddy." The tutor thanks him and ends the meeting.

Two weeks later, Josh receives a formal allegation letter. It quotes his statement as an admission of prohibited AI use. His essay also received a 44% AI detection score. The university says the combination of his "admission" and the detection score meets the balance of probabilities threshold. Strict liability applies, so his intent and understanding are irrelevant to whether the offence occurred.

Josh argues:

- He wasn't told the meeting was an investigation
- He didn't understand "idea generation" was prohibited – the guidance said AI couldn't "produce" work, and his lecturer said checking argument structure was fine
- His admission was made honestly without understanding it would be used against him
- A 44% detection score is barely above the threshold and isn't proof

Discussion questions:

- Is an "informal chat" compatible with the GPF's requirements on notice, support, and fair opportunity to respond?
- Has the university met its B2 obligation to provide clear support on "understanding and avoiding academic misconduct" when the handbook, policy, and lecturer say different things?
- What does "produce" mean when AI is involved iteratively throughout the learning process?
- If strict liability applies (intent irrelevant to offence), what evidence is needed to prove the act occurred on balance of probabilities?
- Is there a consumer protection issue if guidance is ambiguous or contradictory?

CASE STUDY 3: The impossible cohort

A 600-student first-year module is assessed by a 2,500-word essay submitted online. The module leader runs all submissions through AI detection software. 312 essays (52%) receive scores above the university's 40% investigation threshold.

The university cannot investigate all 312 students with available staff resource. It decides to investigate the 50 highest scores. Of these, 31 are found to have committed misconduct. The remaining 262 students above threshold receive no further action.

The academic registry notes that of the 31 students penalised, 24 are international students (77%), despite international students comprising only 35% of the module cohort. This data is not shared with the misconduct panels or raised in any institutional forum.

Aisha, one of the 31 penalised students, appeals. She argues:

- Another student with an identical detection score (51%) was not investigated because they fell outside the top 50
- The selection process was arbitrary – students with the same "evidence" received different treatment
- The disproportionate impact on international students suggests the process or the tools may be discriminatory

Separately, the module leader raises concerns with the Dean that the assessment design was not fit for purpose. She argues that setting 600 students an unsupervised take-home essay, knowing AI detection is unreliable and investigation capacity is limited, was bound to produce this outcome. The Dean responds that changing assessment methods mid-year would be disruptive and that the current approach "sends a message about academic integrity."

Discussion questions:

- Does B4's requirement that assessments be "designed in a way that minimises opportunities for academic misconduct" have implications for assessment choices at scale?
- What does "reasonable steps to detect" mean if you can only investigate a fraction of flagged work?
- Is selective investigation procedurally fair if students with identical evidence receive different treatment?
- Should providers be monitoring and reporting on whether misconduct allegations disproportionately affect particular student groups?
- For OfS: is this an assessment design problem, a detection problem, or a resource problem – and whose responsibility is it to fix?

CASE STUDY 4: The academic judgment shield

Dr Chen has taught creative writing for 20 years. She reads Marcus's short story submission and believes it was AI-generated based on "flat characterisation, generic metaphors, and a lack of authorial voice." She does not use detection software – she says her professional expertise is sufficient.

Marcus is called to a panel. The evidence is:

- Dr Chen's written statement that the work "does not read like authentic student writing"
- Dr Chen's view that, in her academic judgment, the prose exhibits patterns consistent with LLM output

Marcus provides character development notes, three earlier drafts showing significant changes, and browser history showing research into the story's historical setting. The panel's written decision does not mention this evidence. It upholds the allegation because "Dr Chen has exercised her academic judgment and we see no reason to substitute our view."

Marcus appeals. He argues:

- Dr Chen is an expert in creative writing, not in how large language models generate text – subject expertise doesn't equal AI detection expertise
- "It doesn't feel like student work" is a subjective impression, not evidence meeting balance of probabilities
- His documentary evidence of process was not engaged with
- He cannot prove a negative – the burden has been reversed

The university's academic misconduct policy contains two provisions:

- Section 3.2: "Academic judgment means a judgment made about a matter where the opinion of an academic expert is essential. It does not apply to factual determinations."
- Section 7.4: "The determination of whether a student has used generative AI in assessed work is a matter of academic judgment."

Marcus argues these contradict each other. Whether he used AI is a factual question – either he did or he didn't. But by defining it as academic judgment, the university has made the finding unchallengeable by definition.

The university rejects his appeal, stating that challenging academic judgment is not a valid ground of appeal. Marcus complains to the OIA.

Discussion questions:

- Is "whether AI was used" a question of fact or a matter of academic judgment? Does the GPF's distinction help here?
- Does subject expertise (creative writing) equate to expertise in AI detection?
- The OIA says academic judgment must be "evidence based" – is a subjective impression about writing style sufficient evidence?
- Can policies legitimately define factual questions as academic judgment to shield them from challenge?
- What's the boundary between legitimate professional judgment and unchallengeable assertion?
- For OfS: do policies that make AI findings unchallengeable raise B2 concerns about fair procedures?

CASE STUDY 5: The fixed penalty gamble

Priya is a final-year student whose visa expires at the end of the academic year. Two weeks before her dissertation deadline, she receives a letter stating that a previously submitted essay has been flagged for potential AI use with a score of 48%.

She is offered a choice:

- Option A: Accept a finding of "minor academic misconduct," receive a 10-mark penalty on the essay, and attend an "AI awareness workshop." This will be recorded on her file but will not affect her degree classification.
- Option B: Request a full investigation. If misconduct is found, the penalty could include a mark of zero for the module, a capped resit requiring her to repeat the year, or in serious cases, expulsion.

The letter states she has five working days to respond. It does not explain what evidence the university holds beyond the detection score. It does not advise her to seek support from the SU before deciding.

Priya believes she did not misuse AI. But she is terrified of jeopardising her degree two weeks before completion, especially given her visa situation. She accepts Option A.

Six months later, Priya discovers through a friend that several students who chose Option B were cleared after investigation because the university could not prove misconduct on balance of probabilities. She complains to the OIA that she was pressured into accepting a penalty for something she didn't do, without understanding the weakness of the evidence against her or the realistic prospects of the alternative.

Discussion questions:

- Is this process compatible with the GPF's requirements on providing evidence and fair opportunity to respond before findings are made?

- Does offering a "deal" before investigation, with severe consequences threatened for refusal, amount to pressure that undermines informed consent?
- Should students be advised to seek independent support before accepting fixed penalties?
- Are there particular concerns where students face additional pressures (visa status, final year, financial circumstances)?
- What does B2's support obligation mean in the context of misconduct procedures – does it extend to ensuring students understand their options?