Global Impact Grants

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From the Editors

We are delighted to share the case studies from the awardees of the 2025/26 Global Impact Grants. The Global Impact Grants are awarded to institutions across the globe for sharing good practice in the form of a short form case study. We have been running the scheme for several years now, demonstrating our commitment to higher education development across borders.

This year we have awarded 13 Grants to institutions from countries as varied as Australia, Vietnam, Republic of Ireland, Netherlands, Malaysia, China and Mauritius, showing the breadth and depth of good practice taking place across the world.

Throughout the collection there is an undercurrent of institutions trying to harness the power of artificial intelligence in a sustainable and ethical way, a key challenge for the sector in the coming years. There are also case studies looking at access and participation, sustainability and improving student outcomes among the collection.

We'd like to thank all of the authors and contributors for their work in producing such insightful and impactful case studies, and hope there are ideas and projects that you can adapt and use in your own institutional context.

Ian Hall, Head of Partnerships (International)
Fiona Whittenbury, Head of Partnerships (Australasia)
Kristian Rumble, Head of Partnerships (MENA)
Ciara Brown, Partnership Development Manager



Advancing access: developing a dedicated support model for care-experienced students in Irish higher education

Betty Attwood, University of Galway

Context and rationale

In 2023, University of Galway established the Republic of Ireland's first full-time higher education (HE) role dedicated to supporting care-experienced students. The role was created within the context of the Irish Higher Education Authority's (HEA) National Access Plan 2022-2028, in which care-experience is recognised as a life experience that contributes to socio-economic disadvantage and underrepresentation in HE (HEA, 2020, 22).

The programme supports students with experience of foster, residential, special, kinship (formal and informal) care and adoption. It was developed in response to three key challenges: low HE participation rates, the absence of targeted institutional supports and a lack of baseline data (Darmody, 2025; Ó Súilleabháin, 2025).

Data on access, participation and engagement is limited, as institutions only record students who disclose their care status through the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme, which excludes those who do not disclose or apply, including mature students or students coming through alternative routes.

Expanding outreach and building referral pathways

The initiative is structured around three KPIs. First, expanding outreach and awareness through collaboration with statutory and community partners. This includes engagement with external organisations, resulting in sustained referral pathways and increased visibility of HE opportunities.

Alongside a high number of referrals from Tusla, student services have standardised forms and applications to offer opportunities for students to disclose care experience. This campus-wide approach has increased the number of students self-identifying and opting to receive information about available specialised supports.

Partnership and community engagement

Engagement with statutory and community partners is central to this work. This includes meeting organisations in their own settings to better understand the barriers to HE and to co-develop appropriate supports. These partnerships with community organisations are key to building trust with hard-to-reach groups and breaking down barriers (McElearney, 2024, 42).

In collaboration with organisations such as Irish Foster Care Association, Galway City Partnership, the local Education and Training Boards, and a range of local organisations supporting people with care experience, we deliver webinars and workshops on pathways to HE and student supports.

This collaborative approach has also enabled impactful initiatives, including on-campus inspiration days for young people age 11-18 featuring local role models and university students ambassadors with care experience, the development of bilingual guide to HE pathways, and joint funding applications with Tusla and Empowering People In Care (EPIC) to develop a training toolkit for HE staff supporting care-experienced students.





Image 1. Collaborating with Tusla, EPIC, the University of Galway Access Centre, and care-experienced students to host an inspiring event for young people in care aged 11–18

Trauma-informed and student-centred supports

The second KPI is enhancing student supports through a trauma-informed, student-centred model. Tailored interventions include targeted guidance, financial advocacy and coordinated access to wellbeing and academic services. Structural supports include ring-fenced accommodation, including for non-term times. Co-created with students, the programme contributes to increased belonging and peer connection.

Student voice and peer support

A small cohort of students joined the Student Advisory Group and were compensated for their time. The group provided valuable insight into the support needs of care-experienced students, contributed to the planning and implementation of a research project exploring the experiences of care-experienced students in HE, and helped to shape the development of peer-support initiatives.

Key outputs included the introduction of Care2Share evenings. These sessions, held twice each semester, feature guest speakers, themed discussions and an opportunity for building informal peer connections. Another important contribution was the group's emphasis on increasing the visibility of people with care experience during the transition into university. In response, we trained student ambassadors to take on paid roles in outreach and orientation activities, helping to foster visibility, connection and a stronger sense of belonging for incoming students.



Image 2. Student Ambassador Yusra is one of six care-experienced Uni4U mentors collaborating on educational outreach and access initiatives.

Data, progression and emerging outcomes

The third KPI is informing policy and practice through ongoing data collection and stakeholder engagement. Data indicates:

1) an increase in care-experienced students progressing to University of Galway
2) increased progression rates.

The number of students with care experience participating in HE in Ireland remains very low, reflecting the continued underrepresentation of this cohort within the sector. Against this backdrop, even modest increases in access and progression are significant and encouraging indicators of progress.

In the first year of the programme, the 2023–24 academic year, 65 students self-identified as having care experience, increasing to 71 students in 2025–26. While the numerical increase is small, it represents a positive trend in participation among a group that continues to face substantial barriers to HE.

Retention and progression data also indicates some improvement over time. In 2023–24, 18% of care-experienced students were repeating a year of study, with associated financial and personal implications, while a further 12% withdrew from their course. By 2025–26, the proportion of students repeating a year had decreased to 12%, and withdrawals had reduced to 8%.

Although the overall numbers remain small, these percentage changes reflect an important shift in access and progression for this group.

Informing policy and national practice

Qualitative data highlights the impact of dedicated support and the need for sector-wide adoption (Barrett, 2026; Irish Universities Association, 2026). The impact of the role is acknowledged across local statutory and voluntary organisations and has been instrumental in its expansion across the state through the creation of the Care Experienced Educational Network of Ireland (CEENI). CEENI brings together further and HE institutions, statutory services and advocacy organisations to strengthen collaboration and promote a more consistent, informed and student-centred approach to care experience across Ireland.

Key aims and objectives include sharing best practice, embedding the student voice, building relationships, advocating and raising awareness, strengthening data collection and use, as well as informing policy, research and practice.

Contribution to the sector

This initiative creates an opportunity for immediate local action on inclusive practice, while simultaneously contributing to national change through collaborative engagement in the network. It demonstrates how targeted, co-designed supports can improve outcomes for care-experienced students.



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Advancing education for sustainable futures: a transdisciplinary living lab model

Assistant Professor Dr Chution Savini and Dr Talissawan Ampornmaha, Srinakharinwirot University (SWU), Thailand; and Dr Erdinç Çakmak, Breda University of Applied Sciences (BUas), Netherlands

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly expected to contribute to sustainable development by equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed to address complex environmental and societal challenges. This case study presents a transdisciplinary living lab model that integrates teaching, research and community engagement through experiential, practice-based learning in Thailand.

The project aligns with the theme of Education for Sustainable Futures by demonstrating how sustainability can be embedded in higher education curricula and by generating tangible benefits for local communities. It offers a transferable model for HEIs seeking to link academic learning to real-world sustainability challenges through interdisciplinary collaboration, field-based education and stakeholder engagement.

Context

The project emerged in response to the long-standing issue of human–elephant conflict (HEC) in villages surrounding Kuiburi National Park in Thailand. For over 40 years, local communities have faced environmental and economic pressures arising from wildlife conservation and land use.

Since 2002, collaboration among park authorities, local communities, tourism operators and local and internation conservation organisations has promoted ecotourism as a strategy for both conservation and rural development.

Fieldwork and stakeholder consultations identified the need to strengthen communication, hospitality and sustainable tourism skills among local villagers, park rangers and tour guides. In response, interdisciplinary teaching activities evolved into a broader initiative focused on regenerative development and community empowerment.

Project aims

The project aimed to develop a transdisciplinary living lab model that integrates education, research and community engagement through reverse engineering commencing from the real demands of local stakeholders. The initiative sought to enhance higher education students' practical understanding of biodiversity through experiential learning while empowering communities through sustainable tourism and conservation practices.





Figure 1, 2. The workshop at Kuiburi National Park (19-23 June 2023, 25-29 June 2024) with SWU and BUas students.

A further objective was to improve communication and collaboration among stakeholders affected by HEC, including local villagers, park authorities and tourism operators. Ultimately, the project aimed to create a scalable and transferable framework that other HEIs could adapt to embed sustainability and community engagement throughout their curricula.

Project implementation

The initiative adopted an experiential, collaborative living-lab approach covering ecotourism management, wildlife conservation, hospitality, protected area management, applied research and engagement with Indigenous communities. Activities were embedded within interdisciplinary courses, in which students and local communities reflected on and co-created their own solutions in Kuiburi National Park and the surrounding communities.

The project comprised community workshops, stakeholder consultations, student-led field research and capacity-building activities for sustainable tourism. A specialised HEC workshop, established in 2023 and continuing through 2026, focused on communication, hospitality, wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism practices identified through stakeholder needs assessments. Students actively participated in fieldwork and collaborative projects, enabling them to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts.

The Sustainable Destinations Living Lab (SusDeLL) became the central platform for connecting students and staff from national and international universities, communities, conservation practitioners and tourism stakeholders. Through this framework, academic learning and research were continuously informed by local sustainability challenges and community perspectives.

Rationale and key performance indicators

The project recognised that environmental conservation, economic development and community wellbeing are interconnected and cannot be addressed through isolated disciplinary perspectives. Experiential learning was central to the project's rationale. By engaging students directly with communities and practitioners, the initiative aimed to strengthen critical thinking, communication, problem-solving and collaborative skills while deepening understanding of sustainability in practice.

Several key performance indicators (KPIs) were used to assess the project’s effectiveness. Student participation in field-based activities reached 100%, while community training activities achieved an 80% success rate, indicating strong stakeholder engagement and knowledge exchange. Communities also reported a 15% improvement in conflict mitigation by shortening communication lines with park rangers and a 20% increase in tourism-related income from sustainable safari activities.

In addition, the project sustained ongoing partnerships among universities, national park authorities, tourism operators, hotels and local communities.

Outcomes

The project generated significant educational, social, and economic outcomes. Students enhanced their empathetic problem-solving, critical thinking, civic responsibility and collaboration through direct engagement with sustainability challenges in real-world settings. Participation in interdisciplinary and field-based learning also heightened students' awareness of human–wildlife coexistence and the practical dimensions of sustainable development.

The initiative produced measurable community impacts. Improved communication among stakeholders contributed to more effective human–elephant conflict mitigation, while sustainable tourism initiatives created additional livelihood opportunities. Local stakeholders particularly highlighted the empowerment of women through participation in tourism and safari guiding activities.

One community leader reflected on the impact of the workshops:

"This workshop has truly empowered women in our village, helping them live alongside wildlife and even take on roles as tour guides for safari tours, improving our livelihoods through sustainable tourism. We are grateful for these workshops."

At the institutional level, the project demonstrated how sustainability can be integrated across teaching, research and civic engagement. It also reinforced the value of living labs as innovative models for transformative, practice-oriented learning.

Reflections

This project demonstrates how transdisciplinary living-lab approaches can advance Education for Sustainable Futures in higher education. By integrating teaching, research and community engagement, the initiative created meaningful learning experiences and contributed to local sustainability goals.

A key strength of the project was its emphasis on collaboration and co-creation. Community members were positioned not merely as passive actors but as active partners in knowledge exchange and problem-solving, thereby strengthening the relevance and long-term sustainability of the outcomes.

SusDeLL facilitated a transferable model for HEIs seeking to embed sustainability, experiential learning and community engagement into their curricula. The project illustrates how higher education can contribute meaningfully to regenerative development while preparing students to become future sustainability leaders.





Figure 3, 4. The workshop at Kuiburi National Park (09-11 May 2025) and participant photo (19-21 May 2026)

Human-AI collaboration for action research planning: a transnational university case study



Dr Erick Purwanto, Yu Wang and Yexiang Wu
Student project members: Youzhong Fan, Jincheng Zhu and Kai Ye
Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU)

Background

Our educational development team supports faculty at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), a transnational university in China, to design action research that improves teaching and learning. The work is valuable but hard to scale. Colleagues come from different disciplines, research traditions and language backgrounds. Some have a teaching concern but little familiarity with educational theory or research design; others have a possible intervention but need help turning it into an actionable, ethical and publishable study. While one-to-one consultation is effective, demand often exceeds our capacity.

To address this scalability issue, we first introduced an AI chatbot with a fixed knowledge base to provide personalised support at scale (Okonkwo and Ade-Ibijola, 2021). However, post-course evaluations revealed significant limitations. Participants reported that while the chatbot helped those with no clear starting point, it was less useful for specific, situated questions. It followed a fixed order, could not infer user intent, and lacked the ability to ask intelligent follow-up questions like human consultants.

Furthermore, a recent study on XJTLU's Scholarship of Teaching and Learning programme have shown faculty face significant methodological challenges, particularly in aligning data collection with pedagogical theories (Wang et al, 2026). To bridge this "theory-practice" gap, we needed an application that could scaffold the adaptation process.

We therefore needed a more collaborative system that could remember context, decompose tasks dynamically and help users produce a usable plan. In spring 2026, we developed InQ2Plan, an Agentic-AI application that shifts the interaction from “chatting about action research” to jointly producing an action research plan. Deliverables include a co-written plan and publishability checks.

Design

The design was literature informed. The Analytics Model for Teacher Inquiry (AMTI) was used as the operational backbone because it connects teacher inquiry with evidence use and helps teachers move from questions to data-informed action (Saar et al, 2022). InQ2Plan implements AMTI through one agent that decomposes planning into stage-specific decisions, remembers project context across sessions and initiates follow-up questions when information is missing.

A second agent runs Canonical Action Research (CAR) checks in the background, strengthening rigour by reviewing whether the project has a clear intervention, researchable question, evidence plan, action-reflection cycle and potential contribution (Davison et al, 2004). To align with our university’s established practice, we incorporated Observation-Plan-Act-Reflect (OPAR) cycle as the underlying engine. Specifically, within the Observation and Planning phases of AMTI, we embedded the Reflection-Description-Verification protocol.

We also added a simulation function once a plan is mostly complete (see Figure 2). This feature generates plausible evidence aligned with the user’s success indicators and data sources. Simulation is useful because action research planning requires teachers to anticipate how evidence will be interpreted before real students are involved. In higher education, simulations can support complex skills by allowing practice in realistic but lower-risk situations (Chernikova et al, 2020). InQ2Plan uses simulated data to assist users to test whether their evidence plan can answer their research questions.

Results

We piloted InQ2Plan with 12 lecturers over one week to examine whether it could support early-stage action research planning. Participants generally agreed that the app reduced dependence on one-to-one expert consultation at the initial planning stage (M = 4.17/5.0) and responded to their specific input rather than offering generic advice (M = 4.42/5.0). This suggests that InQ2Plan addressed a key weakness of the earlier chatbot by being experienced as more adaptive, contextual and productive.

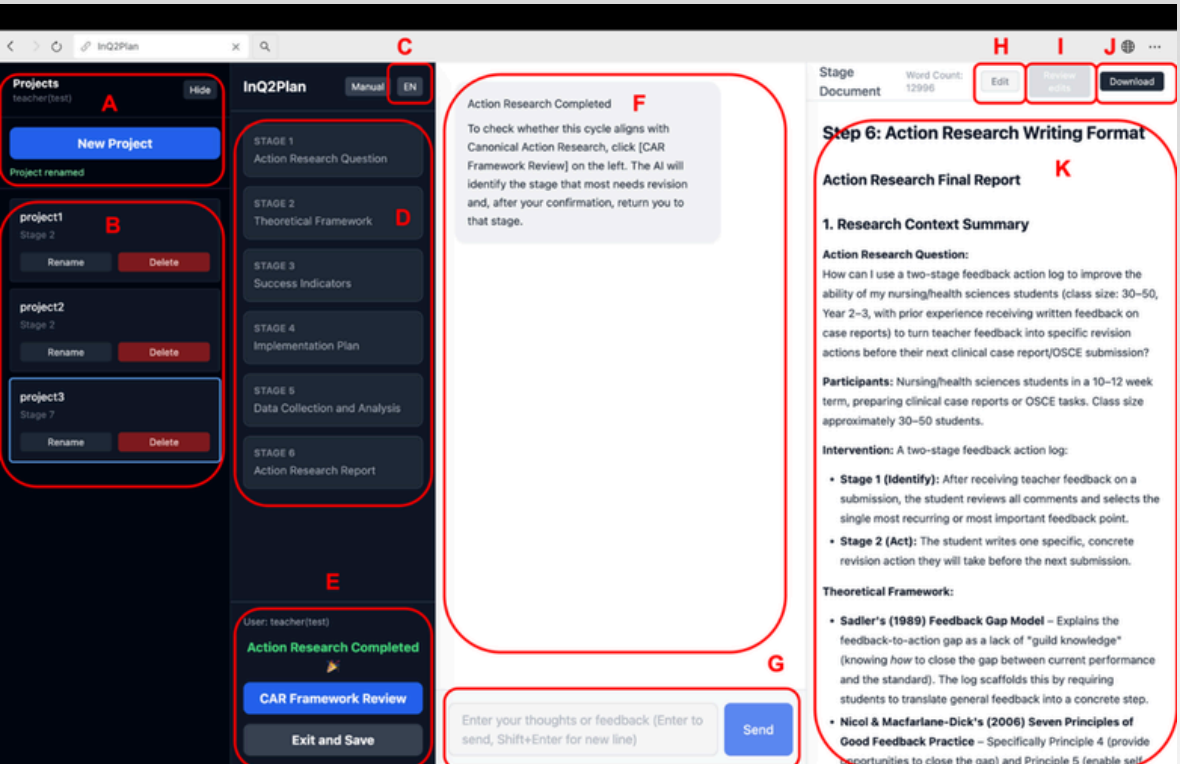


Figure 1. InQ2Plan interface. Users can create a new project (A), manage saved projects (B), switch among Chinese, English and Indonesian (C), navigate AMTI stages (D), check completion, CAR review status or save progress (E), receive AI guidance (F), enter questions or reflections (G), edit (H), preview (I), download (J), and co-write the action research plan (K)

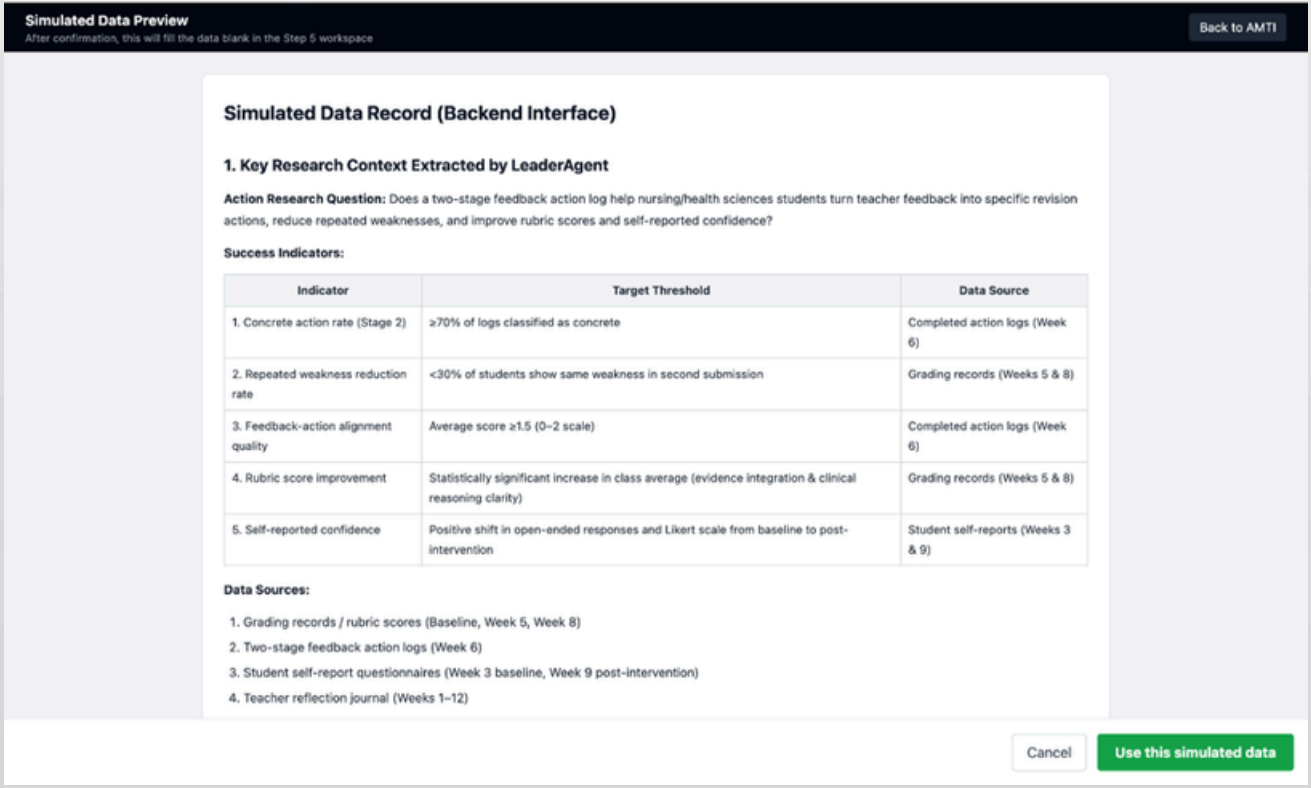


Figure 2. Simulated data preview. Users may apply simulated data to rehearse the AMTI process, and inspect the generated evidence table showing indicators, target thresholds, data sources and possible outcomes

Across cases, it helped lecturers move from practical teaching concerns to structured, evidence-informed inquiry designs. An economics lecturer who wanted to improve deep learning and critical thinking through group presentations and two-way feedback had strong disciplinary expertise but less confidence in pedagogical theory. The app suggested relevant educational frameworks and helped her connect intervention design with theory, evidence and evaluation. She reported that the plan became clearer stage by stage, linking intended student outcomes with a research-informed design.

Other cases showed how the app supported refinement, co-writing and problem reframing. A language teacher working with final-year project students used InQ2Plan to design support for stronger thesis introductions and citation integration. She noted that it helped her separate the teaching activity, success indicators and evidence, while the document “grew with me instead of staying as a chat.” An engineering lecturer began with a broad concern that students struggled with circuits understanding. Through our app, this became a publishable inquiry into how targeted teaching activities could improve conceptual understanding.

He said the app pushed him to define what the concept, intervention, evidence and contribution are. A science lecturer teaching machine learning initially wanted to ban AI use or require ChatGPT logs because polished assignments showed little reasoning.

InQ2Plan prompted him to examine student submissions and identify the real mechanism: the assessment rewarded final products rather than visible learning. His intervention shifted toward staged submissions, process weighting, metacognitive reflection and AI-use records as evidence of cognitive engagement.

Conclusion

This work highlights three main benefits: wider access to planning support, quicker movement from early concern to draft plan and greater confidence in shaping actionable, researchable and potentially publishable projects. For Education for the Future, it shows that AI should not replace academic judgement, but help organise, extend and challenge it.

InQ2Plan can strengthen staff capability for evidence-informed teaching (SDG 4), support AI-enabled educational innovation (SDG 9), and widen developmental support across language, discipline and research experience (SDG 10). Two design principles matter: use established inquiry frameworks, and generate usable scholarly artefacts while keeping consultation inclusive, auditable, scalable and human-led.

Acknowledgement

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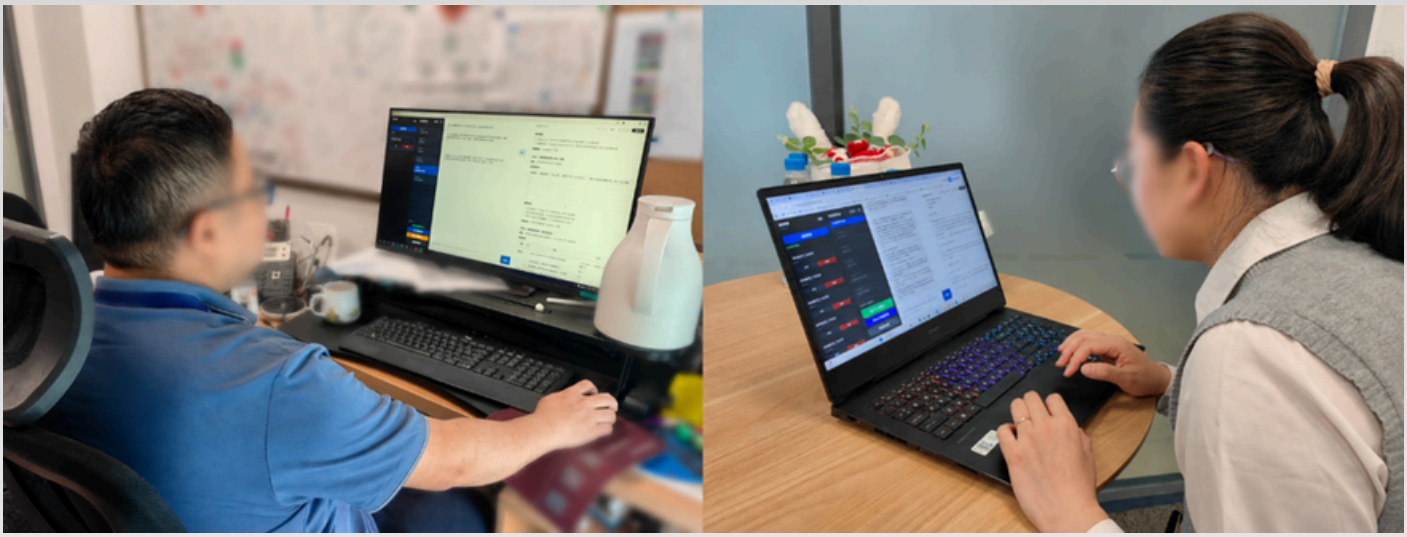


Figure 3. Pilot participants using InQ2Plan to develop action research plans in their own teaching contexts

From policy to practice: governing generative AI for coherent learning and assessment transformation

Jessica Price, Anthony Beh and Tissa Chandesa, University of Nottingham Malaysia; Sue Lynn Mah, Sunway University; and Joshua Khoo, University of Nottingham, UK

This case study addresses how institutions can move beyond reactive policy responses toward coherent, pedagogically grounded transformation and provides an evidence-based framework for embedding generative AI (GenAI) in ways that are authentic, inclusive and sustainable. Institutional responses vary widely, from the more conservative approach of banning AI use or attempting to “design it out” of assessment. This varied approach overlooks GenAI’s potential to support learning, accessibility and productivity.Institutional guidance now increasingly emphasises that students must remain responsible for their work, using AI to support, not replace, learning, and aligning its use with assessment objectives.

Project design

The initiative was conducted between 2024 and 2025 and comprised of three core research strands:

1. Student Prompting Behaviour (n = 57)
Students completed a GenAI-supported essay, with prompts analysed to identify patterns of AI interaction and engagement.
2. Student Attitudes, Self-efficacy and Motivation (n = 300)
A survey examined how student AI usage relates to academic confidence and learning motivation, using a moderated mediation framework.
3. Interdisciplinary Staff Perspectives (n = 18)
Interviews with academics across 12 disciplines explored pedagogical responses to GenAI, including implications for teaching and assessment design.



Approach

The project adopted an ecological systems framework, conceptualising higher education as an interconnected system that spans multiple levels, including learner behaviour in terms of AI use, learner cognition such as attitudes and motivation, pedagogy encompassing teaching and assessment practices, and institutional governance relating to policy and ethics. This perspective allowed a more comprehensive understanding of how GenAI operates across the educational landscape.

Impact and results

The project revealed important insights into student behaviour and engagement with GenAI, highlighting that usage is far from uniform. Four distinct prompting strategies emerged, highlighting meaningful variation in how students engaged with GenAI. Some students adopted minimalist approaches, using short and direct prompts to obtain immediate outputs, while others used more task-focused prompts that provided clearer instructions or constraints. A further group engaged in iterative refinement, gradually improving outputs through follow-up prompts, while others adopted a more exploratory and conversational style, treating GenAI as a learning partner.

This variation reinforces the view that GenAI use is not uniform, but potentially shaped by students' individual approaches to learning, confidence and task engagement. As such, teaching strategies should move beyond generic guidance and instead support students in developing more purposeful, reflective and adaptive prompting practices. Alongside this, the survey findings indicated that students with lower academic self-efficacy showed increased motivation and confidence when supported in their use of GenAI, pointing to its potential as a tool for enhancing inclusion and reducing attainment gaps when appropriately scaffolded.

The study also underscored significant implications for assessment design. Academic staff began to reconsider assessment practices, shifting towards formats that foreground reasoning, judgement and authorship.



This included greater use of oral presentations and viva-style assessments, as well as process-based approaches such as draft submissions, prompt logs and reflective accounts. However, the project also revealed disciplinary differences in how readily GenAI was adopted. In STEM-related fields, uptake and adaptation appeared more seamless and was often met with less resistance, partly because AI could be positioned as a tool for coding, problem-solving, explanation and technical support.

In contrast, adoption within humanities-based fields was more complex, as language, interpretation and written expression are often central to the learning outcomes themselves. This meant that staff in these areas had to engage more carefully with questions of authorship, originality and whether GenAI use supported or displaced the very skills being assessed. These differences highlight the need for discipline-sensitive approaches to GenAI integration rather than a single institutional model.

These changes mark a move away from focusing solely on outputs, towards evaluating the processes underpinning student learning. Furthermore, academic staff increasingly assess and weight students' generative AI engagement.

The project further highlighted that issues of academic integrity are often linked less to intentional misconduct and more to a lack of clarity around appropriate AI use. Where expectations were clearly communicated and aligned with assessment design, students reported reduced anxiety and greater confidence in navigating AI use.

For staff, engagement in workshops, forums and institutional discussions contributed to increased confidence in interpreting policy, designing AI-resilient assessments and distinguishing between legitimate use and misconduct. In addition, findings were disseminated through conferences extending the project's influence beyond its immediate context. Collectively, these outcomes demonstrate the importance of aligning policy, pedagogy and practice to support both student development and institutional coherence in the integration of GenAI.



Lessons learned

There was a notable reliance on restrictive or inconsistent policies, often developed rapidly in response to perceived risks rather than grounded in pedagogical considerations. There was a lack of shared understanding among staff and students about what constituted acceptable AI use, creating uncertainty and inconsistency in practice. Furthermore, the diversity of disciplinary priorities made it difficult to apply uniform rules, highlighting the limitations of one-size-fits-all approaches. These challenges prompted a critical reflection on the role of institutional policy; meaningful and sustainable responses to GenAI require alignment between policy, pedagogy and assessment design, ensuring that expectations are not only clearly communicated but also educationally purposeful.

This case study provides a replicable, evidence-based model for navigating the integration of GenAI in higher education. It demonstrates that student use of AI is heterogeneous and highly context dependent, requiring flexible approaches rather than uniform policies. The findings also highlight that maintaining assessment integrity must be addressed through thoughtful assessment design rather than prohibition alone, shifting the focus towards evaluating student reasoning and process.

It reinforces the critical role of AI literacy for both students and staff: for students, this involves ethical and critical engagement with AI tools, while for staff, it includes the ability to redesign assessments and provide clear, consistent guidance on appropriate AI use.

The transition from restrictive AI policies to pedagogically informed integration represents a critical shift in higher education.

Designing a scalable model for a future-focused higher education

Justin Michael Battin, Sasha Stubbs, Nguyen Ngoc Phuong Uyen, Nguyen Hai Binh, RMIT University Vietnam

Overview

This submission speaks to the theme Education for the Future by presenting Sustainability and Creativity, an elective at RMIT University Vietnam, as a scalable model for future-focused higher education. The course is a useful case study for other higher education institutions (HEIs) because it brings together sustainability, creativity, industry partnership, and digital pedagogy in a form that is both locally grounded and internationally transferable. Instead of treating sustainability as abstract content, the course positions it as a real-world challenge requiring interdisciplinary thinking, collaboration and applied problem-solving.

Background context and intervention

Sustainability and Creativity, taught at RMIT University in Vietnam, is grounded in the need for higher education to address the multifaceted challenges of sustainability. Traditional learning environments in Vietnam have been reported to communicate sustainability as abstract and in inauthentic contexts (2023). To pave a new path, problem-based learning, industry-partner informed service learning and blended learning supported by innovative pedagogical technologies, were applied to equip students with the interdisciplinary knowledge, critical thinking skills and ethical sensibilities required to tackle global sustainability challenges. Pedagogical literature shows that these approaches have been proven to foster authentic engagement, motivate students to apply their learning to real-world contexts, and prepare them for the complexities of contemporary work environments (Sterling, 2011; Tran, 2021).

Leveraging the Canvas learning management system, the course provides media-rich content such as videos, interactive diagrams and gamified knowledge checks that scaffold student understanding. Opportunities for asynchronous social learning and collaboration are provided through use of tools such as polling, in page atomic discussions and Padlet. Before attending the face-to-face sessions, students engage with interactive multimedia to activate prior knowledge and gain foundational insights into sustainability concepts, such as the environmental impact of consumer behavior or the mechanics of systems thinking.



Industry-partnered learning further enhances the course's authenticity and relevance. Course students have collaborated with local partners such as Rethink Plastic Vietnam, UNICEF, Alternō, Smart Solar and Lại Đây Refill Station to co-design and implement projects that address sustainability issues relevant to Vietnam, such as upcycling plastic waste into marketable products, developing communication campaigns for underserved communities, or designing growth hacking strategies for renewable energy. These experiences have not only deepened students' understanding of sustainability but also allowed them to apply theoretical concepts to practical solutions, fostering a sense of agency and civic responsibility.



Student responses

In four of the six deliveries, 100% of students expressed satisfaction with the quality of the course. Students have consistently praised the presence of industry partners in course experience surveys. One student remarked. **"the industry partnership with Rethink Plastic Vietnam was a highlight. It allowed me to work on a real-world sustainability issue, and I felt that I was making a tangible impact."**

The course's use of the learning management system also fostered a sense of community and collaboration among students, who were encouraged to engage in group discussions, provide peer feedback and upload reflections about their learning journeys. This praise is reflected in a student's comment:

"It was wonderful to learn from others' perspectives. We come from different backgrounds, and the course encouraged us to work together and learn from each other's experiences."

This aligns with the course's focus on social presence and the importance of building a supportive learning community, as advocated by Garrison et al (2001). These examples of feedback directly speak to the effectiveness of the blended learning approach and industry collaborations in motivating students and enhancing their learning outcomes.

Course's impact

Through industry partnerships, technology integration and collaborative learning as catalysts to foster student engagement and success, Sustainability and Creativity has provided valuable insights into designing education for the future.

The course has effectively highlighted the importance of a well-structured learning management system to facilitate an engaging and cohesive learning experience. The design of the course Canvas, which integrates multimedia content, formative tasks and social learning opportunities for peer feedback, has proven to be an effective tool in supporting active learning and ensuring that students are adequately prepared for in-class activities.

Lessons from the course's design and delivery have helped shape RMIT Vietnam's broader adoption of blended learning principles, contributing to a model now embedded across 270 courses. The course design and its impact were recognised in 2025 with three Platinum LearnX Awards for Best Learning & Development: Environmental Education, Best Learning Model: Blended Learning (Industry Specific - Information/Media), and Best Ed Tech: Blended Learning.

The use of locally based industry partners provided students with authentic, problem-based assessments that mirrored the demands of the workplace. This approach is aligned with the recommendations of Wiek et al (2011), who emphasise the need for interdisciplinary sustainability education that integrates theory and practice to equip students to tackle complex sustainability challenges. The tangible impact of problem-based learning is evident in several student-led sustainability projects actioned on campus, such as the upcycling of university event tarps into tumbler cases. Another project involved students working with a local partner to create products from upcycled lanyards collected from the university's students and staff.

Overall, 1,614 lanyards were collected and transformed into 43 bags, 87 pencil cases, and 120 passport holders. Student course work informed by a brief provided by UNICEF was selected for presentation at the European Chamber of Commerce's Green Economic Forum and Exhibition, which the Deputy Prime Minster stated was "one of Vietnam's most significant and prestigious annual events — a model for public-private cooperation in fostering sustainable green growth" (vov.vn 2024). During the years 2024 and 2025, four student projects have received RMIT Student Awards for Excellence in Sustainability. Finally, the course served as a key pillar for a €65,000 Team Finland Knowledge Grant in 2025, in collaboration with Aalto University, extending its impact from classroom innovation to international educational collaboration.



Next steps for consideration

As the teaching team reflects on the course, we recognise the need to continue evolving the curriculum to meet the changing needs of students and to address new sustainability challenges. In future iterations of the course, the team plans to integrate more student-partnered and co-designed learning elements. By involving students more directly in designing assignments and projects, the teaching team aims to foster greater ownership of their learning and encourage them to take an active role in shaping the course content and structure. This aligns with the Students-as-Partners pedagogy (Matthews et al, 2018), which emphasises genuine participation and shared responsibility in course development. We will also draw onCoDesign in Higher Education principles (Huber and Jacka, 2021), which provide structured methodologies for collaboration among students, industry partners, learning designers and teaching staff. These approaches ensure that course development benefits from diverse expertise while maintaining academic rigour, creating an inclusive and innovative learning environment.



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Transforming learning and teaching at scale: a strategic AI integration model for future employability

Kevin Nguyen, RMIT University Vietnam

Introduction

As generative AI (GenAI) reshapes graduate employability, tertiary institutions face increasing pressure to systematically embed AI capability development across curricula (Nartey, 2024; Portocarrero Ramos et al, 2025). Since 2025, The Business School (TBS), RMIT University Vietnam has developed a scalable and transferable model that integrates AI into curriculum, authentic assessment and student support services within its blended learning model to prepare students with the AI capabilities expected in future workplaces, while maintaining academic integrity and meaningful learning.

Context and rationale

Industry demand for AI-related employability skills is growing rapidly (Jacques et al, 2024). However, institutional approaches to AI integration in higher education often remain fragmented, with inconsistent guidance across curriculum and assessment (Singh and Mohamad, 2025). At TBS, students were already independently using AI tools in their studies, yet many lacked the knowledge to use them ethically, critically and effectively.

This challenge became particularly visible in the BUSM2580 Integrated Perspectives on Business Problems (IPBP), a first-year business foundation course where students apply Design Thinking to solve business problems. Traditionally, students had limited opportunities to interact with authentic stakeholders during empathy-building activities.

GenAI introduced the possibility of AI personas that could simulate stakeholder interaction while simultaneously developing students' core employability capabilities, including AI literacy, critical thinking, adaptability and innovation.

Project scope and objectives

As the course coordinator, I initiated a project in late 2024 through IPBP as a pilot for integrating foundational AI literacy into learning and teaching, aligned with Nartey's guiding principles for GenAI in employability and learning (Nartey, 2024). The initiative pursued three objectives:

- equip students with foundational AI literacy for study and future employability
- strengthen staff capability in AI-enabled learning and authentic assessment
- foster collaboration between academics and student support teams to improve student learning experiences.

Comprehensive implementation strategy

The initiative adopted a coordinated implementation strategy that embedded AI literacy into students' learning experiences while establishing a scalable model for broader institutional adoption.

Embedding AI capability into students' learning journey

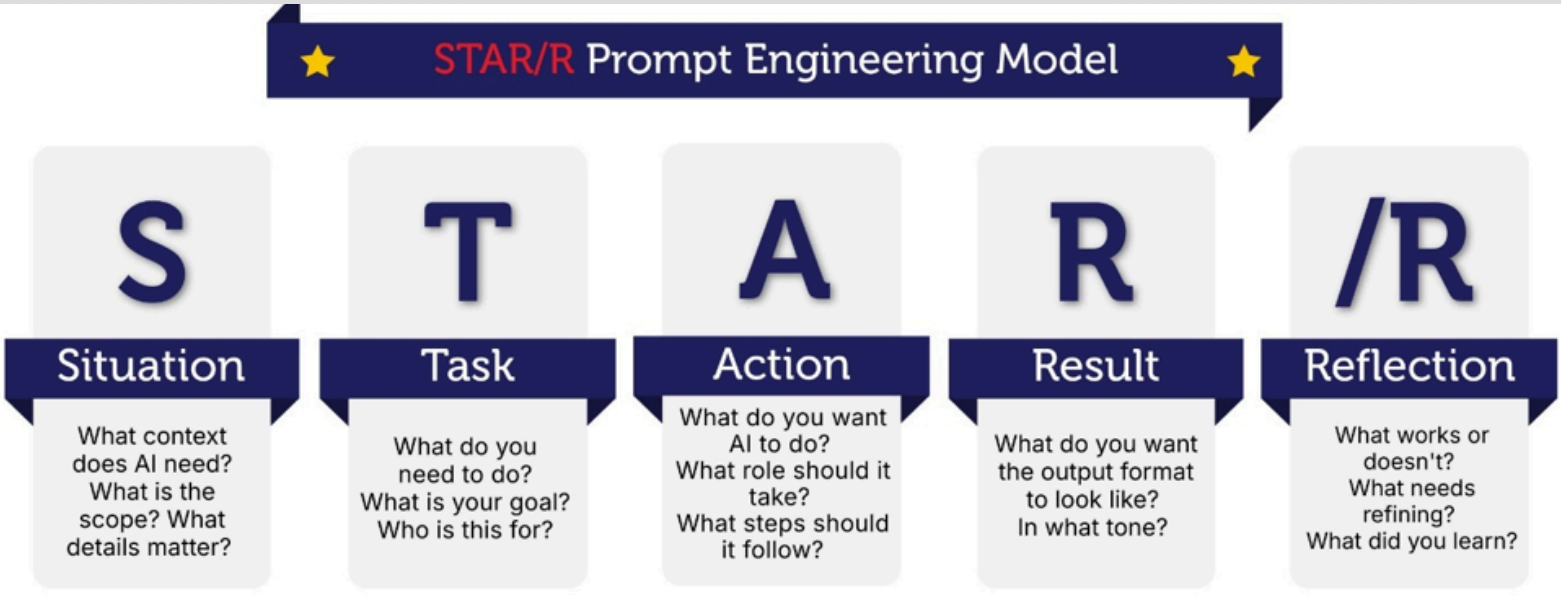
The initiative integrated AI literacy into the course across three interconnected dimensions: curriculum design, authentic assessment and cross-functional collaboration.

To support authentic and applied learning, the course incorporated two real-world social enterprise case studies: a learning case study used in tutorial and digital classes for students to practise Design Thinking and GenAI skills, and an assessment case study designed with a scaffolded structure that enabled students to analyse problems and propose practical solutions using Design Thinking and GenAI.

Within the curriculum, students developed ethical AI literacy, prompt engineering skills, and critical thinking through Design Thinking activities linked to the learning case study. Students learned how to use AI responsibly, critically evaluate AI-generated outputs, and apply prompt engineering techniques effectively through the STAR/R model developed by the course coordinator (Figure 1).

Authentic assessment was redesigned using two interrelated approaches informed by emerging AI assessment literature (Akbar, 2025; Karim et al, 2025; Singh and Mohamad, 2025) and applied to the assessment case study. In AI-integrated authentic assessment, students used tools such as OpenAI's ChatGPT and RMIT's VAL to create and interact with AI personas to empathise with stakeholders, define business problems and ideate solutions. In AI-resilient authentic assessment, students applied AI critically in contexts where reasoning, judgement and contextual interpretation could not be outsourced to AI. Together, these approaches shifted assessment from content generation toward critical thinking, ethical judgement and purposeful AI engagement.

Figure 1. The STAR/R Prompt Engineering Model



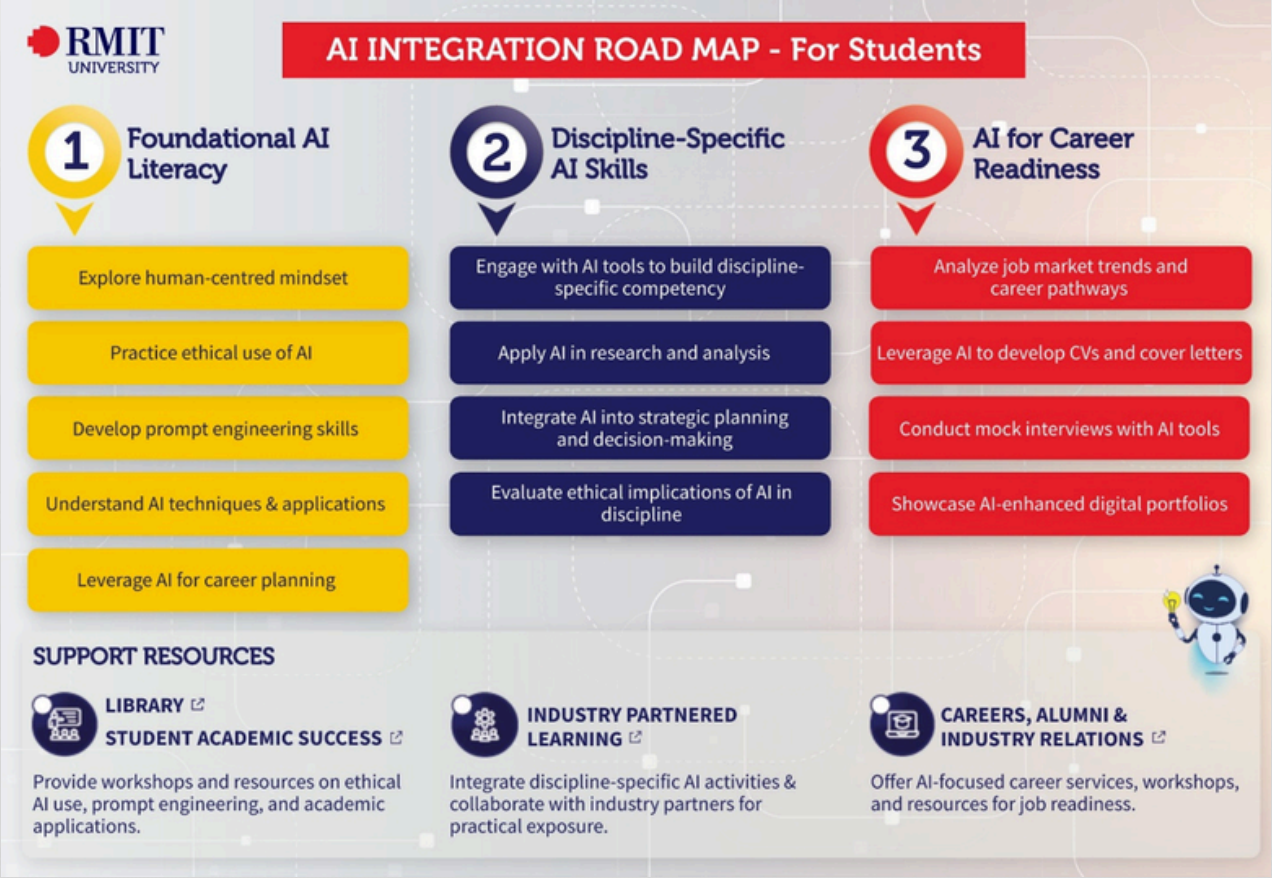


Figure 2. AI Integration Roadmap

The initiative also embedded cross-functional collaboration into the student learning experience. The Library delivered workshops on AI-enabled research and verification of AI-generated information; Student Academic Success (SAS) supported responsible AI use and academic integrity; and Careers, Alumni and Industry Relations (CAIR) integrated AI-enabled career exploration, CV360, and Interview360 into career preparation activities. This collaborative approach created a connected and consistent student experience while strengthening alignment between academic learning and employability development.

Designing a scalable and future-focused AI integration model

Following the successful implementation within IPBP, I led a cross-functional working group comprising TBS academics, Learning Design, SAS, Library and CAIR to develop the AI Integration Roadmap (Figure 2). The roadmap outlines a structured three-phase pathway for equipping students with AI literacy, discipline-specific capabilities and career-ready skills throughout their learning at RMIT.

Phase 1, Foundational AI Literacy, focuses on ethical and effective AI use for academic tasks and critical engagement with AI. Phase 2, Discipline-Specific AI Skills, equips students with AI practices relevant to their fields and future professions. Phase 3, AI for Career Readiness, supports students in leveraging AI for employability, including career exploration, CV development and interview preparation.

The roadmap positions AI not as a standalone topic, but as a professional capability intentionally integrated across curriculum, authentic assessment and student support services throughout the student learning journey.

Sustainable impact

The initiative generated significant impact across students, staff and institutional collaboration. At the course level, it has impacted more than 3,000 students and more than 50 academic staff. Digital class attendance exceeded 90% during AI-focused sessions, while overall attendance increased by 50% during the first half of the semester.

Student feedback from the AI impact survey was overwhelmingly positive: 97% agreed AI literacy improved their understanding of key course concepts; 94% reported stronger critical thinking rather than reliance on AI for answers; 93% felt more confident using AI responsibly and ethically; and 91% said the course helped clarify their career goals and employability skill development.

The initiative also strengthened staff capability in AI-enabled teaching, facilitation and assessment, while fostering stronger collaboration between academics and professional staff to create a more coordinated and student-centred approach to AI capability development.

The AI Integration Roadmap later became the strategic framework for TBS's AI Capability Development Program for Students, impacting thousands of TBS students annually, while also supporting broader AI capability initiatives for academics and professional staff. Its principles have since been adopted across TBS programmes and shared with other schools within RMIT Vietnam, RMIT College of Business and Law, and universities in Vietnam, demonstrating scalability and adaptability across educational contexts.



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The Southern Cross Model: transforming success and retention for diverse and under-recognised student cohorts

Dr Elizabeth Goode, Prof Thomas Roche and Prof Erica Wilson, Southern Cross University

The Southern Cross Model (SCM) demonstrates how universities can redesign learning to deliver better outcomes for diverse and under-recognised student cohorts. Implemented across 2021–23 at Southern Cross University, Australia, the SCM replaces traditional 13-week trimesters, lectures and exams with six-week immersive blocks, focused study loads, guided active learning and authentic assessment.

Why the Southern Cross Model?

Southern Cross University is a regionally based public university in Australia with high proportions of students who are first-in-family, regional, online, mature-age, low socioeconomic status and/or Indigenous. Many of these students are the "new majority", balancing study with employment or caring responsibilities (Wilson et al, 2025b). Prior to the SCM, the university's success and retention rates were persistently below sector averages – in 2019, around one in three students left the institution during their first year of study.

The need for reform was urgent. The rationale for the SCM was both pedagogical and equity-driven: to create learning conditions that increased engagement, and supported students coming from under-recognised backgrounds (Roche et al, 2025) to build confidence and ultimately succeed in their studies.

Principles for pedagogical change

The SCM (Figure 1) was far more than just a calendar change. It was a pedagogical reset across a whole institution, underpinned by three core principles: focused, guided and active learning (Roche et al, 2024). The SCM draws on several established frameworks for effective learning: cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988); Chickering and Gamson's (1991) Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education; constructive alignment (Biggs, 2014); and inclusive pedagogy (Stentiford and Koutsouris, 2021).



- Focused learning is achieved through six-week teaching terms in which students study one or two units at a time, rather than dividing attention across four concurrent units. This two-unit structure provides the benefits of ‘block’ learning while maintaining the flexibility to enrol full-time or part-time.
- Guided learning is enacted through the careful scaffolding of online modules and class learning. Academics become curriculum guides rather than content transmitters. Assessments are designed to be authentic, manageable and to guide students through engaging tasks that develop academic and professional competencies.
- Active learning replaces passive lectures and static materials. Students engage with media-rich, interactive and responsive online modules that include videos, readings, quizzes and formative tasks. Class learning is delivered either on campus or online through tutorials, workshops and practicals, and designed to be dialogic, peer-engaged and practice-based.

Scaling change across an institution

Institutional change across curriculum, policy and technology was required (Roche et al, 2024; Wilson et al, 2025a). Reform was led through the Academic Portfolio Office, with executive-level leadership from the Pro Vice-Chancellors Academic, oversight from Academic Board and Council, and distributed leadership through Associate Deans Education and Discipline Chairs in Faculties and Colleges, the Centre for Teaching and Learning, and professional work units such as the University Library and Business Intelligence and Quality.

- More than 930 units across non-award, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes were redeveloped across all faculties, colleges, campuses and partners (including transnational education partners in China and Papua New Guinea).
- Policies and procedures were revised for curriculum design, assessment, teaching and learning delivery, academic integrity, special consideration and grade release.
- Grading and feedback processes were streamlined for six-week teaching terms.

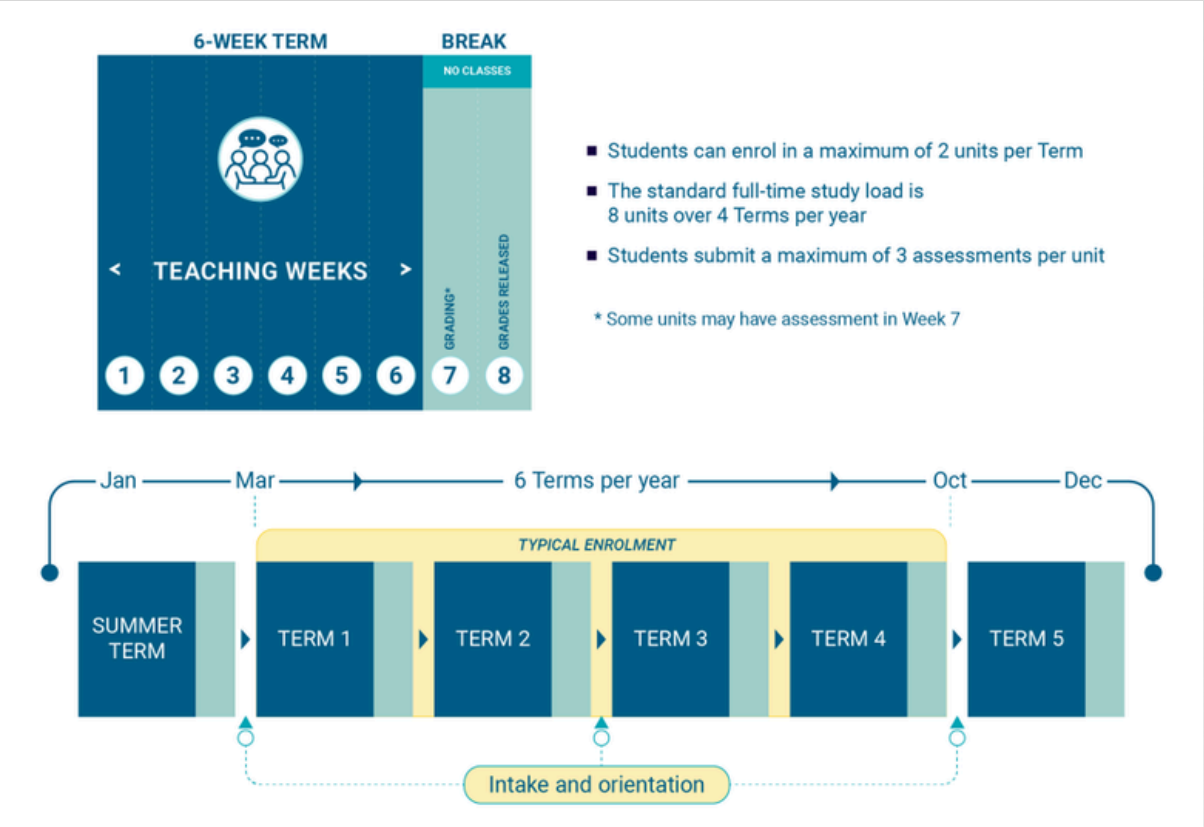


Figure 1. The Southern Cross Model (Goode et al, 2023)

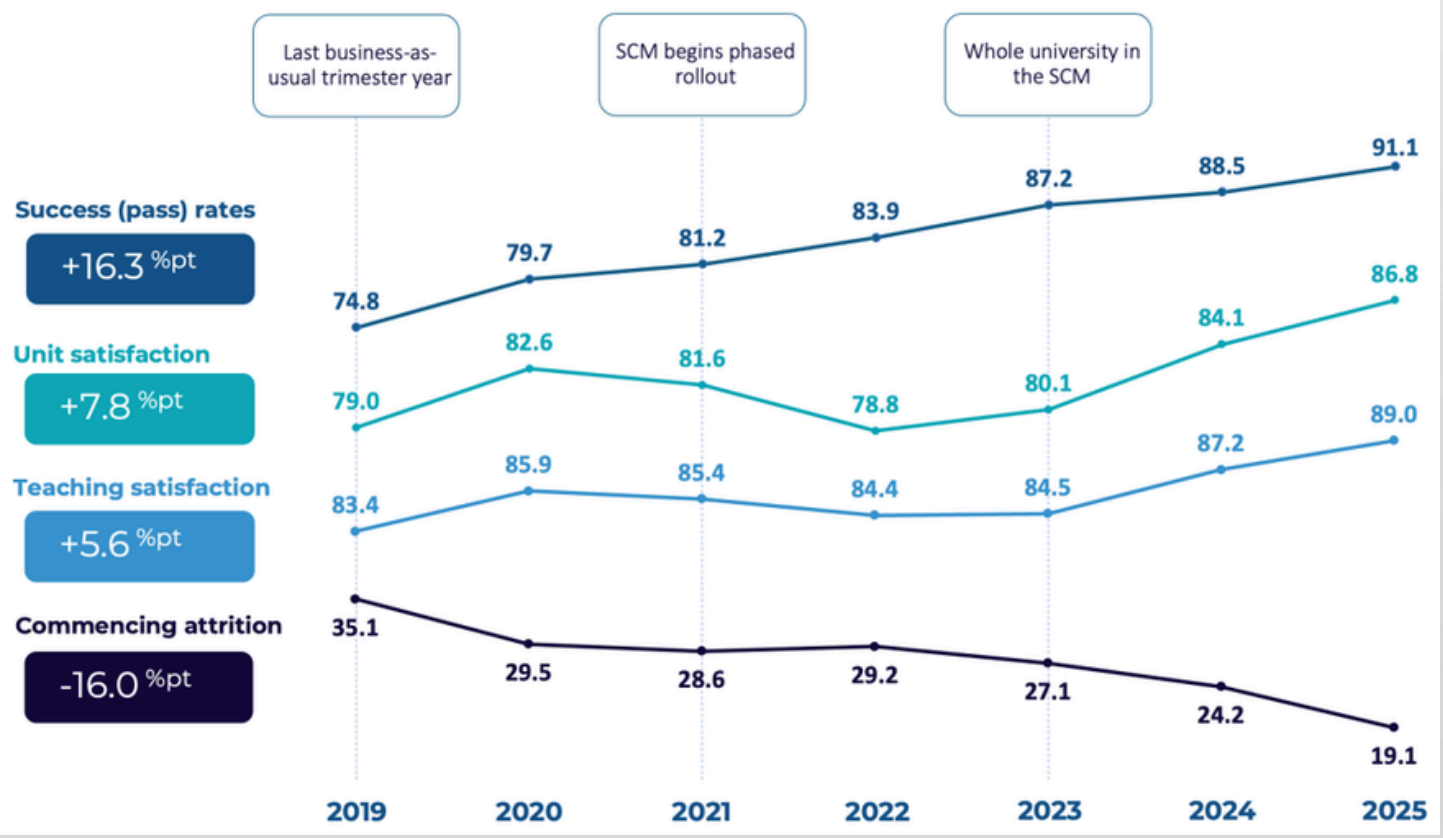


Figure 2. Impact of the Southern Cross Model on student success, satisfaction and attrition (Source: SCM Dashboard and Course Metrics Dashboard, 5 December 2025)

- PowerBI dashboards were developed to monitor student performance, satisfaction, retention, load and equity outcomes in near real time.
- The university invested in educational and digital design, practitioner-led professional development, communities of practice and local academic champions.
- These mechanisms helped to shape the SCM as a shared and ongoing pedagogical and cultural transformation (de Main et al, 2025).

These mechanisms helped to shape the SCM as a shared and ongoing pedagogical and cultural transformation (de Main et al, 2025).

Impact and outcomes

The impact has been transformative (Figure 2). Institutional data show that success (pass) rates at the university are now over 90%, satisfaction with units and teaching is close to 90%, and attrition among commencing students has almost halved.

Outcomes across units delivered in both the trimester model and the SCM demonstrate success (pass) rate increases for:

- non-award pathway students (+19.2% points) (Goode et al, 2024b)
- onshore international students (+17.5% points) (Goode et al, 2024a)
- under-recognised (or 'equity') students (up to 10% points) (Roche et al, 2025)
- varied disciplines: Natural/Physical Sciences (+15.4% points), Society and Culture (+13.4% pts), Information Technology (+12.1% pts), Creative Arts (+9.3% pts), Management/Commerce (+7.8% pts), Health (+3.3% pts), and Education(+3.2% pts) (Roche et al, 2026)
- part-time students (+13.5% points) and online students (+10.8% points) (Wilson et al, 2025b).

Students describe the SCM as manageable, focused and motivating. The goalposts are clear and achievable. Early feedback and results build confidence and momentum. In students' words:

"It allows you to work and to be fully engaged in two units per time. It's much more manageable."

"I feel way more capable now... I'm like, I can actually do this."

"The six-week mode keeps me like, okay, we are finishing… that really motivates me."

Lessons for the sector

There is a growing evidence base demonstrating the benefits of block models such as the SCM. This work demonstrates that transformative higher education reform is possible when strategy, pedagogy, policy and evidence are aligned. However, change of this magnitude is not easy, and wins are not always quick. An important lesson learned at Southern Cross, and at other block institutions (Buck and Tyrrell, 2022; de Main et al, 2025; McCluskey et al, 2019), is that block models are not successful merely because of scheduling. Their impact also depends on:

- a supportive institutional change culture, committed to rethinking long-standing assumptions about teaching and learning practice
- clear evidence-based pedagogical foundations
- co-designed, fit-for-purpose curriculum redesign
- strong academic governance
- ongoing investment in staff capability (ie professional development)
- cross-functional cooperation across an institution.

With these elements in place, universities can move beyond incremental improvements to create more purposeful, inclusive and engaging learning environments that support students from all walks of life to succeed in higher education.

Want to know more?

See Research and Scholarship on the SCM, or scan the QR code below.



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Supporting doctoral wellbeing through structured writing communities: the HDR Writer's Wellbeing Lounge

Natasha Kitano, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Australia

The challenge: inclusion, belonging and doctoral wellbeing

Higher degree research (HDR) or postgraduate research (PGR) students are often described as independent researchers, yet doctoral education can be an isolating experience (Ciampa and Wolfe, 2020). Research has consistently identified isolation, loneliness, writing anxiety and a lack of social connection as significant challenges affecting doctoral wellbeing, engagement and completion. These challenges can be particularly acute for students studying remotely, part-time, internationally, or while balancing employment, caring responsibilities, disability, or health concerns (Kitano et al, 2025).

While universities commonly provide academic development opportunities, there are often fewer structured spaces that explicitly foster belonging and connection. Increasingly, higher education research recognises that meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging are fundamental to student success. For doctoral researchers, peer communities can provide important sources of emotional, social and academic support (Dowling and Mantai, 2015).

The HDR Writer's Wellbeing Lounge (the Lounge) was established at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in 2020 in response to these challenges. The initiative was designed around a simple question:

How can universities create structured opportunities for PGR students to write, connect and flourish?

The HDR Writer's Wellbeing Lounge

The HDR Writer's Wellbeing Lounge is a community-based researcher development initiative that integrates focused writing, reflective practice and peer connection through a simple model: Write – Reflect – Relate.

Write

Participants engage in structured Pomodoro-style writing sprints that provide dedicated time for thesis writing, reading, publishing and other research activities. Research suggests that regular, moderate writing practices are more sustainable and productive than infrequent periods of intensive writing (Boice, 1990). The writing sprints help students establish productive writing habits while reducing writing-related anxiety in the company of peers.



Reflect
Following each writing sprint, students are encouraged to reflect on their progress, challenges and writing processes. Reflection helps students make meaning from experience, recognise achievements and develop greater awareness of their research practices (Boud et al, 1985).

Relate
The final component creates opportunities for students to connect with other PGRs through discussions on various topics, including academic identity, motivation, publishing, supervision, work-life balance and wellbeing. These conversations foster connection and align with Wenger's (1999) concept of communities of practice, where learning occurs through participation, shared experiences and mutual support.

The Lounge is also informed by Vygotsky's (1978) view that learning is inherently social and shaped through interactions with others and the surrounding environment. Although participants work independently on their own research, the shared writing experience creates a sense of collective endeavour, demonstrating how connection and belonging can support both learning and wellbeing. Together, the model recognises that doctoral success is not solely an intellectual endeavour. It is also social, emotional and relational.

Impact

Since its establishment, the Lounge has engaged approximately 2,000 participants across disciplines and stages of candidature. The initial plan was to launch the Lounge as a face-to-face initiative, but it rapidly adapted to online delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic before evolving into a hybrid model. Its flexibility has enabled participation from on-campus and remote students.

Research on the initiative found that students perceived the Lounge as supporting writing productivity, social connection, motivation and wellbeing. Importantly, the benefits extended beyond academic outcomes. Students frequently described the Lounge as a place where they felt connected, supported and part of a broader research community.



One participant reflected:
"As a first year PhD student, attending the HDR Writer's Wellbeing Lounge sessions has provided me with a space to connect to others and to feel less isolated about the difficulties of starting a PhD. These sessions have supported both emotionally and academically, and they have cultivated a sense of belonging within the HDR community at QUT."

Another student wrote:
"Thank you again for the time and effort you put into creating a community that made me feel welcomed, belonging and motivated."

And another student reflected:
"I've been in a writing funk all week… the social interactions between writing sprints have been so motivating and have helped lift my mood towards my work."

These comments highlight an important insight: students often seek more than academic skills development. They seek connection, encouragement and opportunities to engage with others who understand the realities of doctoral study.

Why this matters

The Lounge demonstrates that inclusion in doctoral education is not simply about access to services. It is about creating environments where students feel connected, valued and able to participate fully in research culture.

The initiative provides a low-cost and transferable model that can be adapted across institutional contexts. It has operated successfully in online, face-to-face and hybrid formats and requires minimal resources beyond facilitation and a commitment to fostering community.

At a time when universities worldwide are grappling with increasing concerns about student wellbeing, isolation and belonging, structured writing communities offer a practical and evidence-informed approach to supporting doctoral researchers.

What other institutions can do

Institutions seeking to strengthen doctoral wellbeing and inclusion may wish to:

- create regular structured writing opportunities for research students
- incorporate reflective practice alongside productivity-focused activities
- build intentional opportunities for peer connection and discussion
- recognise wellbeing as an integral component of researcher development
- design programmes that are accessible to both on-campus and remote students
- foster communities that connect students across disciplines and stages of candidature.

The HDR Writer's Wellbeing Lounge demonstrates that relatively simple interventions can have a profound impact when they create opportunities for students to write, reflect, relate and belong. By embedding connection alongside academic development, universities can create more inclusive research cultures in which doctoral research students are better supported to thrive.

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Bridging the gap between academia and industry – transforming education with an AI-integrated Learning Management System (LMS)

Nidhi Oswal, Liwa University, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Introduction

Higher education institutions are increasingly expected to prepare graduates for technologically dynamic and analytically demanding workplaces. Traditional assessment methods – often reliant on memorisation – frequently fail to capture the competencies required in contemporary organisations. Aligned with UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), Liwa University implemented an AI-integrated LMS to enhance pedagogical innovation and strengthen the alignment between academic learning and industry practice. This initiative, supported by Advance HE's Global Impact Grant, reflects the institution's commitment to its Academic Excellence and Innovation pillar.

Project overview

The intervention was implemented during the autumn 2025–26 semester in HRM 401: Compensation, enrolling 20 undergraduate students. The traditional midterm examination was replaced with a group-based, authentic assessment requiring students to design a comprehensive compensation and benefits plan for a hypothetical startup organisation.

Assessment structure

Students worked in four groups of five and were required to:

- conduct job analysis using AI-enabled simulations
- apply the Point-Factor Method to determine internal job worth
- develop market-aligned compensation structures using data-driven modelling
- present their findings and run the simulator live during their final presentation.

To support this assessment, the LMS was redesigned as an AI-enhanced learning environment incorporating:

- AI-generated simulations
- audio-visual learning materials
- interactive games and quizzes
- adaptive role-play activities
- personalised learning pathways.

Pedagogical rationale

The intervention was grounded in experiential learning theory and the “Do and Learn” philosophy. Simulation-based learning enabled students to engage with realistic HR scenarios without the risks associated with real-world decision-making. The pedagogical goals included:

- enhancing the authenticity of assessment
- strengthening digital literacy
- fostering data-driven decision-making
- increasing student engagement
- developing industry-relevant competencies.

Implementation of AI-enabled simulation

Students were trained to use Google Gemini, a freely accessible generative AI platform, to construct simulations tailored to their assigned startup scenarios. They gathered job-related data – tasks, duties, responsibilities, required competencies and market salary benchmarks – through online research and instructor consultation.

Classroom training and data collection process

Students received guided classroom instruction on using Google Gemini to construct compensation simulations aligned with their assigned startup scenarios. A critical component of this training involved learning to formulate precise, context-specific prompts. Students were required to gather relevant job information – tasks, duties, responsibilities, required knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs), and current market salary benchmarks – through both online research and consultation with their instructors.

During the in-class demonstration, the instructor modelled how variations in job requirements influence compensation outcomes within the simulator. Students observed how modifying factors such as experience level, technical competencies, or job complexity produced measurable changes in salary recommendations. This iterative process enabled students to understand the direct relationship between job design and compensation decisions, reinforcing the importance of data-driven analysis in HR practice.

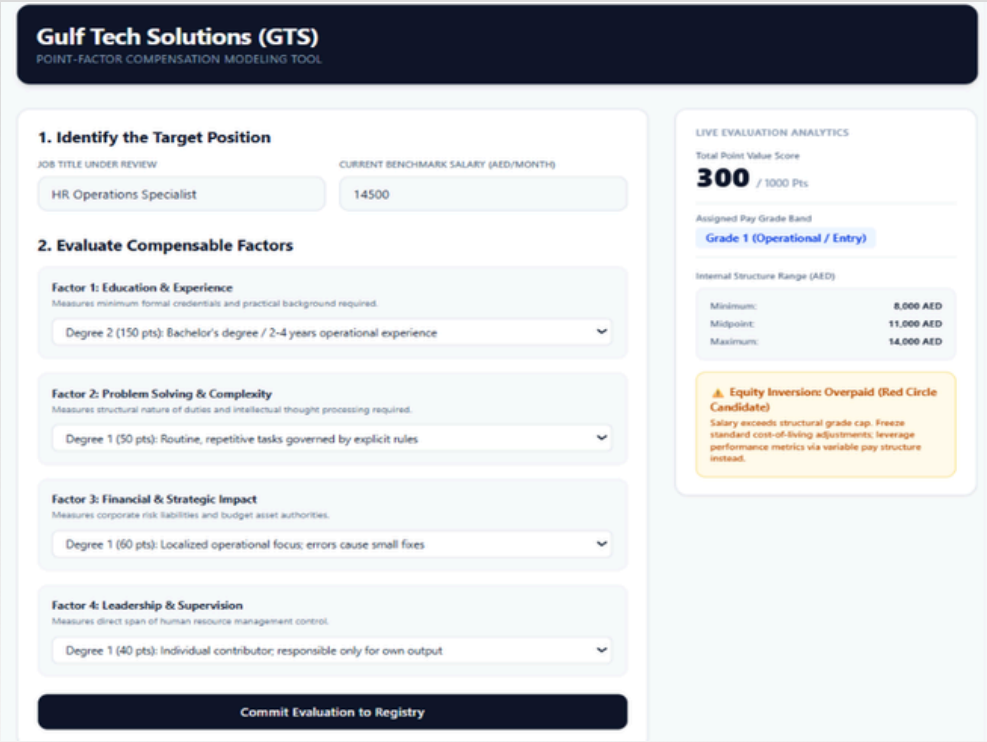


Figure 1 illustrates an example of the point-factor compensation modelling tool used by students to evaluate job roles

Example of instructor-led simulation demonstration

To support students' understanding of simulation logic, an instructor-led demonstration was conducted using an AI-based compensation simulator. This example illustrated how modifying job-related variables – such as rank, institutional tier, or performance metrics – produces measurable changes in compensation outcomes. Figure 5 presents the screenshot used during this instructional demonstration, reinforcing the principles of data-driven decision-making introduced in class.

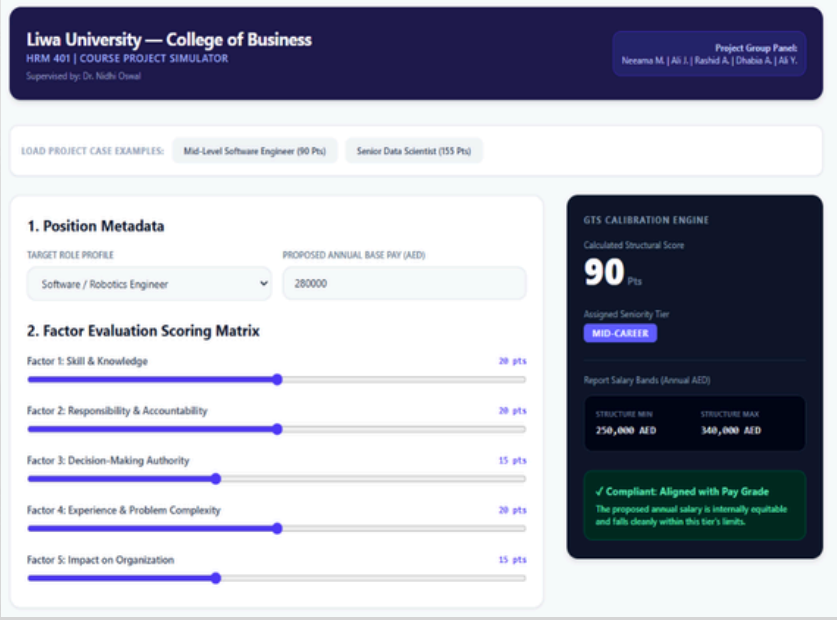


Figure 2 shows an example of the course project simulator that students use to evaluate roles such as software/robotics engineer.

Evaluation and impact

An end-of-semester online survey was administered to evaluate the intervention's effectiveness. Key findings include:

- over 70% of students reported that the AI-integrated LMS enhanced the effectiveness and efficiency of their learning
- students reported a 40% increase in engagement and confidence in applying HR concepts to realistic organisational contexts
- positive word-of-mouth led to increased enrolment in the subsequent semester, with students "inquiring about the Simulation in the introduction week".

Additionally, students explored broader applications of AI-based compensation modelling, including academic salary structures.

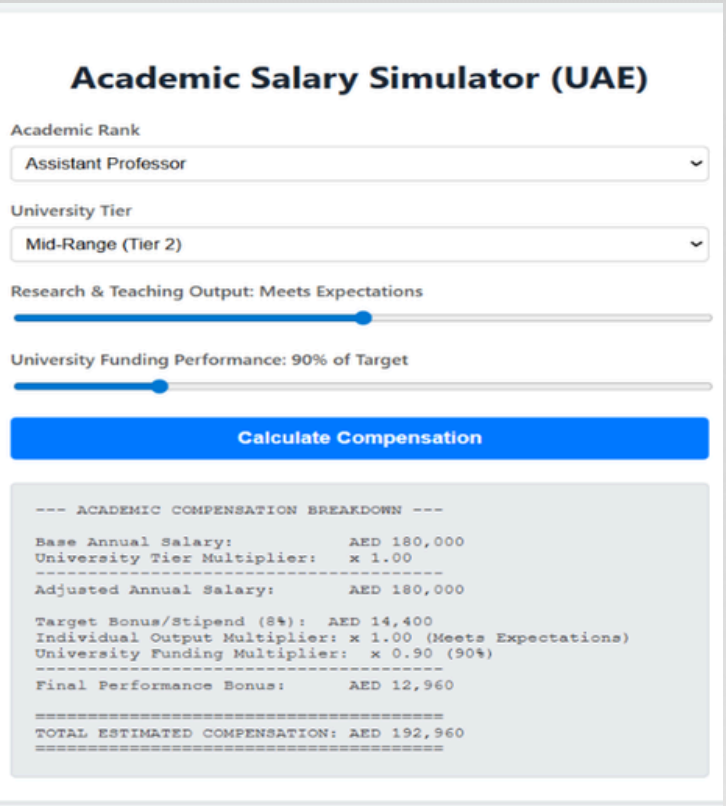


Figure 3. Academic Salary Simulator (UAE) – Example from classroom instruction to demonstrate how compensation simulations respond to changes in job-related variables.

Discussion

This case study illustrates how generative AI can be meaningfully embedded in business education to promote authentic assessment and industry-aligned learning. The intervention supports institutional KPIs related to innovative teaching practice and improved student outcomes. It also contributes to broader global conversations on the future of education, digital transformation and the role of AI in enhancing pedagogical effectiveness.

Conclusion

The project demonstrates that AI-integrated LMS environments can effectively bridge the gap between academic learning and industry expectations. By replacing traditional examinations with simulation-based assessments, students gained hands-on experience, strengthened their analytical capabilities and developed confidence in applying HRM concepts to real-world scenarios. The success of this intervention underscores the potential of generative AI to transform higher education and advance the goals of quality, equity and innovation in learning.





Figure 4 visualises student perceptions of AI usefulness, showing strong agreement across all measured dimensions

Beyond the game: designing gamified learning experiences for a software engineering course

Bibi Rubeena Doomun, Senior Lecturer, Open University of Mauritius, Mauritius

Introduction

The shift towards digital and open education has opened new pathways for access and lifelong learning. However, it has also introduced critical challenges related to student motivation, engagement and retention, particularly in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) environments. Many learners in ODL settings face isolation, low interaction and decreased motivation, which can negatively impact their academic performance. These challenges are especially pronounced in contexts such as Mauritius, where institutions are striving to balance rapid digital transformation with learner-centred pedagogical approaches.

This project was initiated to directly address these challenges by exploring gamification as an innovative solution to enhance digital learning. Gamification integrates game design elements into instructional materials to create a more engaging and interactive learning environment.

Central to gamification are fundamental game elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, narratives, avatars and progress indicators that structure learner interaction and foster engaging user experiences (Christopoulos and Mystakidis, 2023; Khaldi et al, 2023).

Gamifying the course

The pilot project investigated the gamification of the Software Engineering course from the BSc (Hons) Computer Science programme, delivered over a 15-week period (August–December 2024) to second-year undergraduate learners. It was grounded in the D6 gamification design model (Werbach and Hunter, 2012) and delivered via the Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS). The gamification design followed a three-tiered structure, namely dynamics, mechanics and components as illustrated in Figure 1.

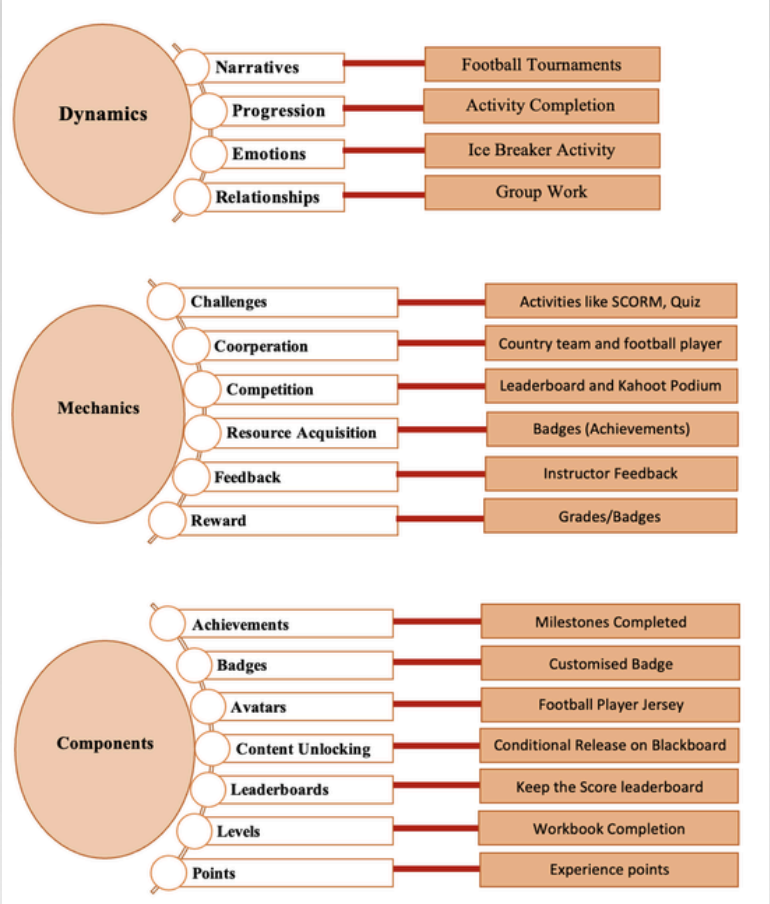


Figure 1: Mapping of game elements in the lesson design

Dynamics – the foundation of engagement

The dynamics layer was used to define the overarching emotional and social contexts that drive learner engagement. Narratives were crafted around football tournaments, with learners assigned to country teams. This theme served as a metaphorical storyline that sustained interest and cohesion throughout the module.

Progression was emphasised through activity completion tracking, helping learners visualise their progress over time. Emotions were activated using icebreaker activities, reducing social friction and fostering a sense of belonging at the start of the course. Relationships were nurtured through group work, encouraging peer-to-peer learning and collaboration. As shown in Figure 2, the documental dictionary provided clear information regarding the scoring system, the activities and the expectations for each level of the gamified experience.



Figure 2: Documental dictionary

Mechanics – the functional core of the experience

This middle layer implemented interactive processes that translated dynamics into actionable learning experiences. Challenges were introduced via Kahoot quizzes and SCORM activities, testing knowledge in incremental stages. Cooperation was reinforced through the country team/football player structure, which encouraged group cohesion and friendly collaboration. Competition was brought in through leaderboards and Kahoot podiums as shown in Figure 3, fostering a healthy competitive spirit.

Resource acquisition was tied to the earning of achievement badges, giving students tangible goals. Feedback came from instructor guidance, ensuring learners had ongoing insight into their progress. Rewards included grades and digital badges, helping to reinforce effort and performance.



Figure 3: Kahoot podium

Components – the tangible elements of gamification

The final layer mapped out the actual features integrated within the LMS.Achievements and badges were granted for milestone completions, using customised visuals aligned with the football theme. Avatars, in the form of football player jerseys, personalised the learner experience and strengthened identity within teams. Content unlocking was done using Blackboard's conditional release function, ensuring that learners could access advanced content only after completing foundational tasks.

Leaderboards were displayed via the Keep the Score plugin as shown in Figure 4 to maintain motivation. Levels and points were reflected through workbook completion and experience points, tracking both progress and effort.

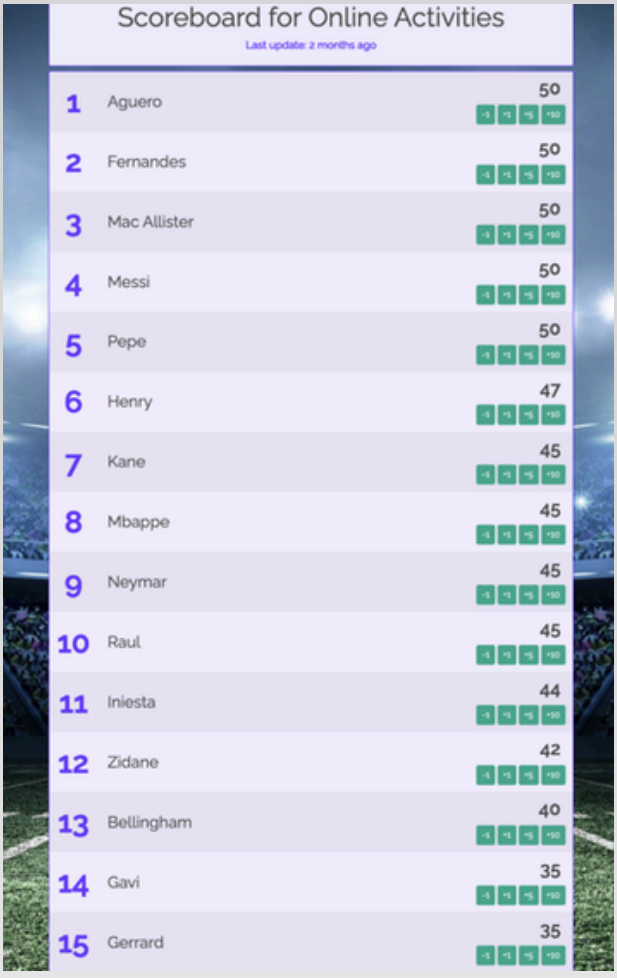


Figure 4: Leaderboard

Findings

Participants reported enhanced cognitive engagement and knowledge retention, particularly through gamified quizzes. The activities were found to be stimulating, and they aligned with their academic objectives. The use of immediate feedback mechanisms allowed learners to assess their understanding in real time. Overcoming challenging activities promotes their confidence and critical thinking skills. The gamification approach led to an increased willingness to participate, explore and improve their learning strategies.

Qualitative data collected through focus group discussions revealed widespread learner appreciation of gamified elements, citing them as motivational and enjoyable. The gamified environment supported not just individual learning but also fostered collaborative behaviour. Learners with varying backgrounds worked in teams, developing interpersonal skills, enhancing cohesion and cultivating a sense of collective responsibility.

One student stated a sense of responsibility and commitment to collaborative efforts: **"My team was Argentina, and my player was Messi. So, I could not let Messi down. I had to work hard. That was a driving force for me."**

Another student pointed out: **"There was something feel-good to it. We had some achievements to do to get grades in the form of rewards. We had a best player overall award and different types of badges depending on the score obtained. I used to feel very nice."**



The reflexive thematic analysis highlighted themes such as ownership, challenge-based growth and emotional engagement. Learners exhibited a strong sense of achievement and self-recognition, with many expressing a preference for continuing with gamified formats in future courses.

Conclusion

This study examined the integration of gamification into an online course within an ODL context, revealing both its pedagogical potential and design considerations. Findings indicate that when carefully aligned with instructional goals, gamified elements can significantly enhance student engagement and motivation.

Acknowledgement

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Higher Education Commission of Mauritius for supporting this initiative through the Scheme Open Distance Learning (ODL) Research 2022/2023. I also extend my heartfelt thanks to my colleagues Dr Belle and Dr Bunnoo at the Open University of Mauritius for their support.

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Starting Strong: embedding inclusion and belonging through academic onboarding

Associate Professor Tanya Weiler, Dr Nazz Oldham and Dr Alice Betteridge, Adelaide University, Australia

Beginning university is not only an academic transition; it is also a social, emotional and identity shift. Students arrive with diverse experiences, expectations and familiarity with university culture, yet are all faced with the challenge of navigating an unfamiliar environment and its often-implicit norms. Starting Strong was developed to address this challenge. A university-wide initiative at Adelaide University created to ensure that students commence their studies with a sense of belonging, confidence and connection, Starting Strong provides an intentional onboarding experience that supports success from day one.

Student success is influenced not only by academic capability, but also by students' understanding of how higher education works, and how they fit within it. Research consistently demonstrates that early experiences of connection, clarity and support are critical to successful transition, particularly for students from backgrounds historically underrepresented in higher education. Starting Strong provides such an experience.

What is Starting Strong?

Originating in an enabling education programme in 2017, Starting Strong has grown into a scalable institutional model at Adelaide University. In 2026, almost 2,000 commencing students participated across undergraduate, online and pathway cohorts. Delivered during Orientation Week, the core initiative is a structured two-hour interactive workshop facilitated by academics and supported by tailored student resources.

The programme was developed around a simple premise: if universities are serious about equity and student success, they must actively create conditions that support students from the moment they arrive. Rather than expecting students to adapt to institutional norms independently, Starting Strong focuses on how institutions can make expectations transparent, support emerging student identities and create welcoming learning environments.



The workshop is built around five Pillars of Strong Student Practice:

- Be Here – engaging actively and building a sense of belonging
- Ask – seeking support and recognising help-seeking as a strength
- Do the Work – developing effective study habits and academic engagement
- RESPECT – valuing self, others and the learning environment
- Make It Count – connecting effort, goals and purpose

Grounded in leading research in student engagement and retention, they provide easy-to-remember mantras to guide students in the behaviours, norms and expectations that contribute to success.

Starting Strong enacts Critical Enabling Pedagogy, a strengths-based approach that positions students as capable learners and values the knowledge, experiences and identities they bring. This is particularly important for students from backgrounds historically underrepresented in higher education, who may be less familiar with university systems or less likely to see themselves reflected in institutional spaces.

The programme deliberately avoids deficit assumptions. Instead of positioning students as lacking, it makes expectations explicit, demystifies the hidden curriculum, normalises uncertainty and reinforces that success at university is learnable. Students engage with peers and staff, rehearse key academic practices, reflect on their goals and encounter examples of diverse learners who have successfully navigated higher education.

Outcomes and impact

Evaluated using a combination of attendance data, student feedback, engagement indicators and academic outcomes, Starting Strong has been found to have far-reaching impacts on students' sense of belonging to higher education, as well as grades.



In 2026, 1,219 students completed evaluation surveys following participation, showing:

- 95.4% of students reported feeling welcome at university
- 96% positively rated the sessions as useful
- 97% reported that the programme helped them feel supported to succeed.

Qualitative feedback reinforced that students particularly valued structured opportunities to connect with peers, understand university expectations and gain confidence about commencing their studies, with comments frequently attributing the programme to reducing feelings of anxiety and uncertainty:
"It gave me the feeling 'I can do this' and I'm not alone and can get help."

Others highlighted the importance of seeing themselves reflected within the university community:
"I found it very reaffirming to see how the Uni connects so many people of different ages, races, genders, and supports them to study and be the best version of themselves they can be."

Students also identified the relational aspects of the programme as particularly important, noting that interactions with staff and fellow students helped them feel accepted and part of a diverse community.

The initiative has also shown a positive relationship with academic outcomes. Within enabling education cohorts, students who participated in Starting Strong achieved an average GPA of 5.0, compared with 4.0 for non-participants. While transition initiatives alone cannot account for all academic outcomes, this evidence suggests that intentional onboarding can contribute meaningfully to engagement, confidence and achievement.

Staff feedback further reinforces the value of the model. One academic commented: **"ALL new students should do these sessions. These ideas and strategies are vital to not only give students skills, but to realise that everyone has challenges around self-management in new situations."**

Starting Strong offers a practical, evidence-informed model for higher education institutions seeking to strengthen equitable student transition. Further value lies in its transferability: the approach can be adapted across disciplines, cohorts, delivery modes and institutional contexts. The model is low-cost, academically led, scalable and grounded in principles that are globally relevant: belonging, inclusion, clarity, confidence and connection.



Key learnings

Starting Strong demonstrates that commencing students want more than information delivery. When intentionally designed as a pedagogical and relational experience, onboarding can foster inclusion, belonging and student success.

Several factors are central to its effectiveness:

- explicitly addressing the hidden curriculum of higher education and providing opportunities to rehearse the expectations of the university learning environment
- positioning students as capable and resourceful learners whose voices are key to learning
- normalising uncertainty and help-seeking as fundamental
- creating meaningful opportunities for peer and staff connection
- embedding institutional inclusion and belonging from the outset.

Future directions

Starting Strong continues to expand across Adelaide University, with plans for 7,000 commencing students to participate in 2027. To support this growth, professional learning in Critical Enabling Pedagogy is being provided for academic staff across disciplines, and an asynchronous version for online students is in development.

As universities globally seek to widen participation and improve student success, Starting Strong demonstrates how belonging can be designed, taught and embedded. It shows that inclusive transition is not an optional supplement to the student experience, but a foundational condition for equitable higher education.

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Prompt Mentor: from generative AI disruption to a transferable institutional model for supporting learning

Toh Yen Pang, Alex Kootsookos, Chi-Tsun Cheng and George Wu,
RMIT University Australia

Introduction

Prompt Mentor, an AI-powered feedforward tool developed at RMIT University, produced statistically significant gains in engineering students' critical thinking and information literacy – outcomes achieved through staff-student partnership, institutional deployment and structured scaffolding of prompt engineering as a transferable graduate capability. This case study describes how the initiative progressed from a staff inquiry into a model now available in RMIT and readily adaptable by other higher education institutions.

Context and rationale

The public release of generative AI (GenAI) tools in late 2022 created an immediate challenge for engineering educators. Students gained access to GenAI tools, which were capable of drafting responses, summarising content and generating explanations, without necessarily developing the analytical judgement those tools require. Rather than restrict access, the engineering teaching team at RMIT chose to investigate how GenAI could strengthen students' reasoning, feedback engagement and information literacy.

Australian universities enrol a large number of international students (Australian Government Department of Education, 2025), with RMIT's international students about one-third of the students of its total student population. Many report challenges with academic reading and writing (Burke, 2020), and engineering courses demand complex problem-solving, often completed outside class without timely staff support. A scalable, equitable and pedagogically sound model was needed – one designed to support diverse cohorts and the staff teaching them.



Project scope, deliverables and timeline

The initiative progressed through three phases between 2023 and 2025. In the first phase, a qualitative study with 19 engineering educators found that 78.9% believed AI could assist personalised feedback, confirming staff readiness for an institutional tool.

The second phase involved co-developing Prompt Mentor with engineering students and staff, supported by cross-functional teams in technical development, digital learning and institutional governance. Prompt Mentor is built on RMIT's secure institutional chatbot VAL, using the OpenAI GPT-4o API within university security and data privacy protocols.

The development approach was framed by three principles aligned with the Conceive–Design–Implement–Operate framework (CDIO Initiative, nd) – an internationally recognised curriculum model built on active learning, integrated design and continuous improvement (Figure 1).

First, AI literacy was treated as a transferable graduate capability rather than a discipline-specific add-on. Second, students were partners in the design process from the start, ensuring the tool's scaffolding matched real learning needs. Third, evaluation was embedded to generate comparative evidence of student outcomes, with findings feeding into the next cycle as GenAI continues to evolve (Figure 1).

In Phase 3, Prompt Mentor was deployed in Mechanics and Materials 2 (a core engineering subject with approximately 250 students per semester) through the Canvas Learning Management System. Students used the tool while preparing a 600-650-word essay on metallurgical topics such as superplasticity and shape memory alloys. From 2024, Prompt Mentor has been available to the wider RMIT community (Figure 2).

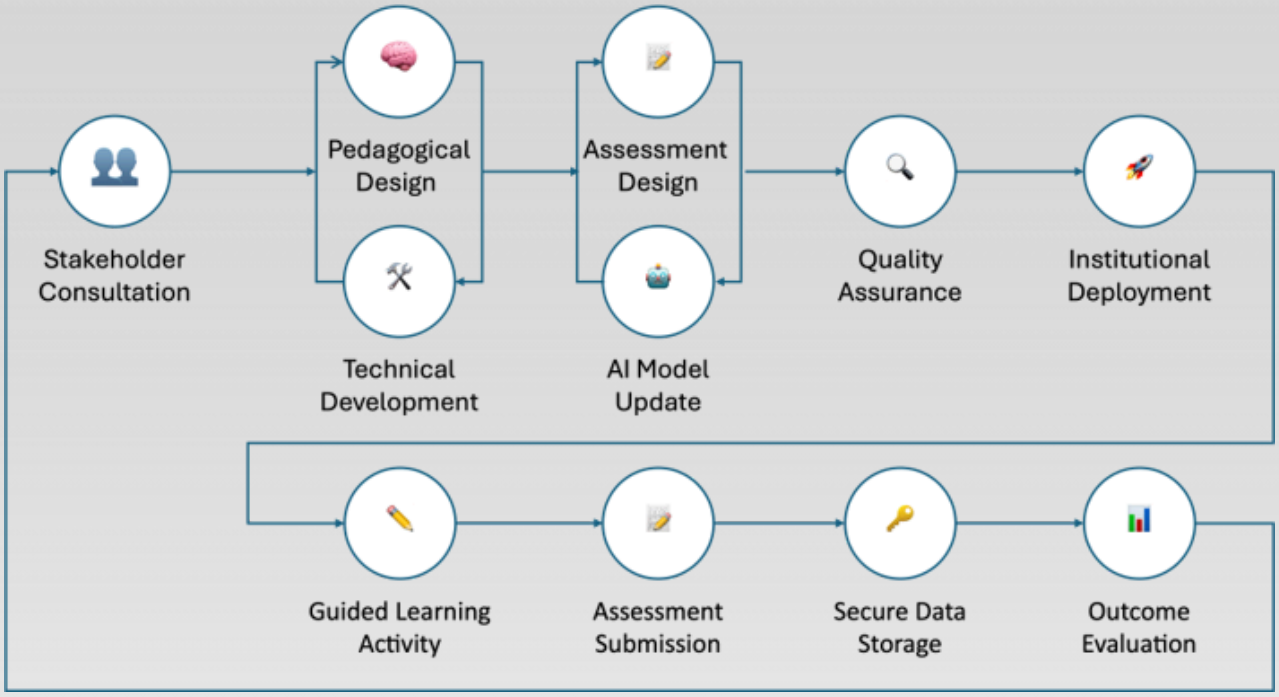


Figure 1. Educational and technical development workflow with Prompt Mentor

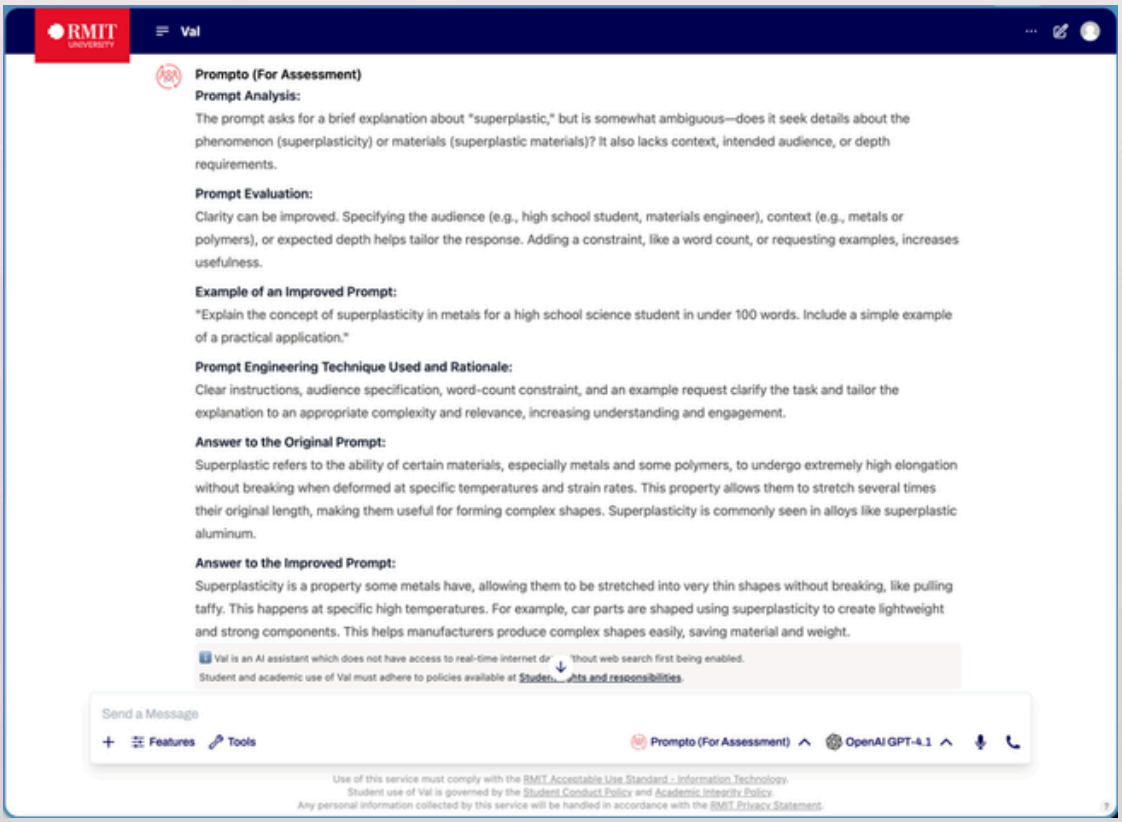


Figure 3. Prompt Mentor interface prompt analysis and improvement for a submitted question

Rather than a general-purpose chatbot, it scaffolds prompt engineering as an iterative, teachable skill: the tool analyses each student prompt, evaluates its clarity and context, produces an improved version and presents worked examples that students can adapt to their own inquiry (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Prompt Mentor introduced to students in a lecture at RMIT.

Impact

A cohort comparison study evaluated outcomes between pre-AI cohort (n = 212, 2022) and a ChatGPT supported by Prompt Mentor cohort (n = 233, 2023). Two independent assessors reviewed 20 randomly selected essays at distinction and high-distinction grade levels, using a standardised rubric. Mann–Whitney U analysis showed statistically significant improvements for the AI-supported cohort in critical thinking ($p = 0.003$) and information literacy ($p = 0.005$). In practical terms, students in the AI-supported cohort produced essays with greater analytical depth, stronger source evaluation and more precisely structured inquiry questions. Students' prompts moved from vague openings such as "What is this topic about?" to targeted questions addressing crystal structure, processing conditions and engineering applications.

Staff reported that Prompt Mentor supported personalised feedforward without adding marking workload. Students from non-English speaking backgrounds benefited particularly: they engaged more confidently with AI material when they could iterate on their prompts before committing to an argument, a design feature that was shaped directly by student feedback during co-development.

What other institutions can learn and apply

Prompt Mentor offers a practical model for institutions navigating GenAI in their curricula. Four features define its transferability:

1.It focuses on judgement and information literacy alongside tool fluency: students learn to use AI well, not merely that they can.
2.Staff-student partnership in design means the scaffolding addresses genuine learning needs.
3.Secure institutional deployment protects intellectual property and data privacy, which is a prerequisite for responsible AI integration at any institution.
4.Embedded evaluation evidence of student outcomes that justifies ongoing investment.

Although developed in engineering context, the pedagogical scaffolding model is adaptable to health, science, business and the humanities disciplines with minimal modification. Institutions without an existing chatbot can replicate the pedagogical approach using any securely hosted large language model, focusing on iterative prompt refinement and worked examples as teachable practices rather than on a specific platform. The work has informed RMIT's broader GenAI strategy and reached the sector through publications on AI-mediated feedback practices (Pang, Kootsookos and Cheng, 2024), transferable AI skills (Pang, Kootsookos and Cheng, 2025), and the CDIO-aligned design methodology (Pang, Kootsookos, Wu and Cheng, , 2025).

Conclusion

Prompt Mentor demonstrates that a teaching team can respond to GenAI by redesigning curriculum, assessment and feedback practices to strengthen students' judgement, academic integrity and future-ready transferable skills. With structured scaffolding, staff-student partnership and secure institutional deployment, GenAI can become a resource that supports learning rather than displaces it. The model is available for adaptation by institutions at any scale and in any disciplinary context.

Acknowledgement

The project was supported by an internal Educational Innovation grant from the Centre for Education, Innovation and Quality. We also acknowledge the cross-functional teams at RMIT University including digital experience, education technology, architecture, quality assurance and strategic partnerships whose collective support enabled this work, as well as the RACE Hub, Amazon Web Services.

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From local classrooms to global collaboration: advancing intercultural and interprofessional education through Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

Zahra Aziz and Debra Kiegaldie, Monash University, Australia

Monash University's Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) programme represents a transformative and scalable model for embedding global, intercultural and interprofessional education within health professions curricula. It responds to the growing need for future health professionals to develop collaborative practice capabilities across professional, cultural and geographic boundaries, while addressing the financial, logistical and equity challenges associated with traditional student mobility programmes.

Programme design and delivery

Led by Monash University, Australia, in partnership with Monash University Malaysia, the University of Padua (Italy), and the University of Nottingham (UK), COIL provides a fully online, co-curricular learning experience that enables meaningful international engagement without requiring physical mobility.

Between 2023 and 2025, the programme engaged more than 400 students and 25 educators across seven countries and 10 health professions, including psychology (27%), nursing (26%), medicine (15%), public health (14%), pharmacy (6%), occupational therapy (5%), and other health professions (7%). The programme comprises four scaffolded two-hour sessions, delivered synchronously via Zoom each year during September-October. This design supports progressive learning and relationship building across cultures and professions through three core components.

1. A shared virtual community space (Padlet), which hosted facilitated interactions including icebreaker activities before and after live sessions, enabling students to connect with peers from different professions and countries, fostering connections.
2. A structured virtual global classroom (Zoom), which hosted facilitated dialogue and collaborative learning activities, engaging students in small intercultural and interprofessional groups to explore global health challenges and develop collaborative problem-solving skills and global perspectives.
3. An authentic AI-enabled simulation (delivered via ATLAS platform), which featured a virtual patient, 'Aalia' – a 32-year-old Middle Eastern woman navigating the Italian healthcare system, providing opportunities for students to practice culturally responsive communication, collaborative care and shared decision-making in a safe and realistic learning environment (see Figure 1).



In Session 1, students explored cultural and professional identity. In Session 2, they applied these insights through a simulated patient-care scenario requiring collaborative decision-making (Aziz et al, 2026). Session 3 involved working in international and interprofessional teams to address real-world global health challenges, culminating in group presentations and reflective writing in session 4.

The innovation lies in the deliberate integration of intercultural learning, simulation and interprofessional education at scale. COIL extends collaboration beyond local institutional boundaries into a global virtual exchange, where students navigate differences in healthcare systems, communication styles and cultural expectations in psychologically safe environments.

Evidence-based design

Traditional international mobility programmes, such as study abroad and international placements, have long supported intercultural awareness and global citizenship. However, they are often constrained by cost, logistics, placement requirements and equity barriers. Virtual exchange models, including COIL, provide a scalable and evidence-based alternative, enabling meaningful global engagement without these limitations (Rubin, 2017; Guth and Rubin, 2015).

COIL was selected as the pedagogical model because it intentionally integrates intercultural and interprofessional learning through structured international collaboration. Grounded in constructivist and experiential learning principles, students engage with peers from different countries and professions to address shared global health challenges, developing communication, teamwork and intercultural capability in authentic contexts. This aligns with literature demonstrating that virtual exchange enhances intercultural and interprofessional competence, adaptability, digital literacy and reflective practice (Hackett et al, 2023; Jager et al, 2020; Liu and Shirley, 2021).

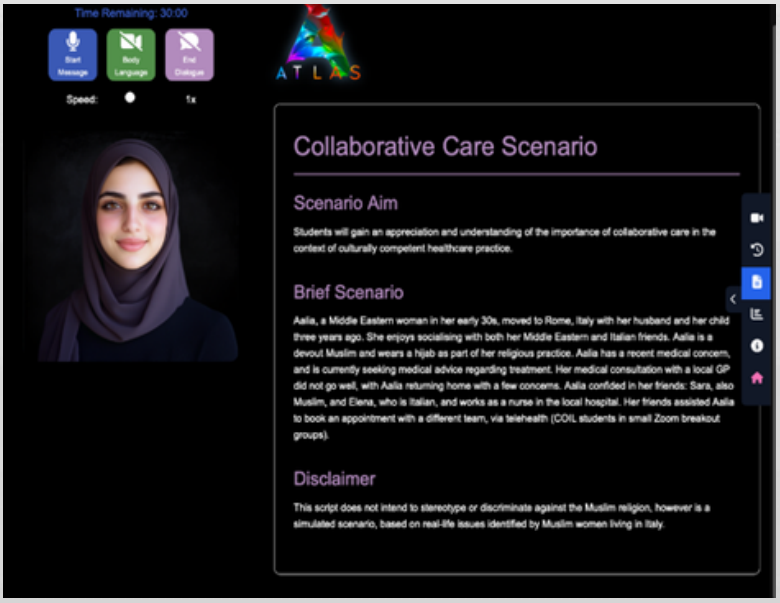


Figure 1: AI-driven simulation using ATLAS

Impact and outcomes

Across the 2023-25 iterations, evaluation data demonstrated consistently strong outcomes. Overall, 90% of participants reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the programme, with a mean rating of 8.2/10. Approximately 90% agreed that the programme enhanced their understanding of interprofessional collaboration, particularly in working with diverse professional groups and recognising the value of shared decision-making in patient care. Similarly, around 90% reported improved intercultural awareness, while 94% valued the opportunity for international learning and global engagement.

“I enjoyed participating in this project as I had the opportunity to get to know different healthcare professionals, but more importantly, I deepened my cultural knowledge.”
– 2023 participant

The AI-enabled simulation, introduced in 2024, further strengthened these outcomes. Using an adaptive, culturally responsive patient-care scenario, students practised collaborative communication and shared care in realistic contexts. Over 80% of students were satisfied with the simulation experience, 88% found it realistic, 90% found it engaging, and 88% reported improved confidence in delivering culturally responsive care.

“The prompt with [patient] Aalia helped put into perspective how many people focus on the medicine and fail to recognise how Aalia requires empathy.”
– 2024 participant

Notably, 88% felt the simulation motivated them to collaborate more effectively with peers from other professions.

“Working alongside students from nursing, medicine and public health, I gained insight into how each profession contributes to holistic patient care and how collaborative decision-making leads to more comprehensive and patient-centred solutions.”
– 2025 participant

Broader impact and future direction

The programme has also demonstrated broader institutional impact. More than half of participants (56%) reported forming new professional connections they intended to maintain beyond the programme, and the AI-enabled simulation has since been embedded into selected health professions courses across partner institutions. Continued institutional commitment has enabled COIL to evolve from a pilot into a sustainable initiative.

COIL represents more than a programme; it is a scalable, low-cost and equitable model for global interprofessional education, delivered at no cost to participants. By removing financial, geographical and logistical barriers, it extends access to meaningful international learning and demonstrates that impactful collaborative practice learning can be achieved through intentional design, authentic engagement and partnership across professions and cultures.

Looking ahead, the next phase of COIL aims to expand beyond its current health-focused, interprofessional scope towards a broader multidisciplinary model.



This evolution will bring together students from diverse disciplines to address complex global challenges, while further strengthening global citizenship, intercultural capability and collaborative problem-solving.

We also welcome opportunities to partner with higher education institutions interested in leveraging and adapting the COIL model to support accessible, scalable and globally connected learning experiences.

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Collaborators
Vanlal Thanzami, Jeffrey Cheah School of Medicine and Health Sciences, Monash University, Malaysia
Alberto Camuccio, School of Medicine and Surgery, University of Padua, Italy
Maria Holden, School of Health Sciences, University of Nottingham, UK
On behalf of the Monash-Padua COIL Team

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