

## Agentic AI in learning and teaching: University response

### Description of paper

The paper flags the emergence of AI agents, explains how they work and sets out their implications for teaching, learning and assessment within the university.

It aims to support discussion in order to reach a university position on the issues raised.

## Overview of AI agents

1. Browser-based AI agents are a further development of generative AI that enable AI to automate task completion in any web-based system – including within Learning Management Systems (LMSs) like Learn – with minimal human input. Now becoming widely available, browser-based agents are emerging as the latest big tech ‘disruptor’ of education. Using these agents, students no longer need to copy and paste responses from an LMS into an AI tool to get a response. They just need to create a basic prompt such as:

Open my online course at [URL]. Login with this username [username] and use the password [password] to log in.  
Complete any forum tasks required for this week and look for any assignments due. If there is one, complete and submit it.

2. An AI agent does the rest, working across the course LMS instance to complete the tasks identified in the prompt. Because the student is logging in with their own username and password, this activity will look like ‘normal’ student engagement – there is currently no way for the course organiser to identify that this is agent activity.
3. This clearly has implications for the ways in which we use our online learning environments. AI agents pose a threat not just to assessment practices (completing online quizzes, writing and submitting essays) but also to forms of online community-building that are used in many courses – discussion forums in particular (agents can actively post to these on behalf of students, or indeed staff).
4. Browser-based agents currently available include Perplexity’s Comet, Anthropic’s Claude, ChatGPT Agent and others. These are being developed for use in multiple professional contexts, but obviously carry distinctive problems for the education sector. There is evidence of significant marketing by providers directly to students at the moment via social media (see [Open Letter to Perplexity AI](#)).

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5. We do not have data on the extent of usage of agents in our LMS – it is probably low currently, but as with ChatGPT in 2023-24 we are likely heading for a rapid surge in general usage and will need to have an institutional response to this.

## **Summary of current debate in higher education**

6. At present there is almost no reliable published research on agent use in higher education teaching, but there is a lot of well-informed commentary. This can be summarised as follows.

### **Alarm**

7. A growing number of academics and administrators have tested AI agents in their own courses and publicly discussed how potentially catastrophic these could be for teaching and learning. Videos showing the automated completion of tasks in LMSs are circulating – these include ‘test runs’ within [Moodle](#), [Canvas](#) and others. They show agents moving through the LMS to find assignments, complete tasks and submit them. In some cases agents have been found capable of impersonating teachers, marking and grading work and posting feedback (see [Colleges And Schools Must Block And Ban Agentic AI Browsers Now](#)).
8. Academics and commentators generally emphasise the risk of inaction on the part of universities – If we do not act, we risk being caught in a cycle of automated assessment creation, completion, marking and feedback in which ‘nobody learns and nobody gains’ (see [The Dangers of Using AI to Grade](#)).

### **Calls for action**

9. There are multiple calls for action circulating, including the American Modern Language Association’s [Statement of Educational Technologies and AI Agents](#), which ‘unequivocally’ advocates for full ‘faculty involvement’ in selection, procurement and responsible implementation of systems and software incorporating AI. It calls upon policymakers, and LMS/AI companies to cooperate with universities to prevent misuse.
10. Academic, administrative and learning technologist commentary online consistently calls for the development of tools to detect and block agentic AI use in LMSs.

### **LMS service provider response**

11. There is no sign that LMS providers are currently accepting responsibility for the impact of agents on teaching and learning, or have the will to create technical

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solutions to enable detection and blocking. The exception here is the (open source) Moodle community through which [some potential technical fixes](#) are currently being explored.

12. Instead LMS vendors and companies are calling for universities to – once more – adapt teaching and assessment to ‘be responsive’ to the emergence of agents, via policy change, assessment re-design and investment in ‘AI literacy’. These calls tend to be based in the argument that students will need to use these systems in their working lives so we should be helping them develop the skills to do so.
13. For example, Anthology – the company behind Blackboard Learn – [released a statement](#) last month claiming that it is currently not possible for platform companies like their own to ‘reliably detect an AI Agent, much less block one’ and that ‘higher ed should focus on preparing learners for a world where human and artificial intelligence are constantly applied in combination’ by adapting their policy and practice.
14. However, universities have a vital public role and unique responsibilities – it is widely felt that platforms should be actively responding to our needs, not just recycling the imperative to ‘adapt’.

## **Summary of the key issues**

15. Assessment integrity is challenged in new ways by agentic AI, and online modes of academic community formation and communication online are potentially compromised.
16. LMSs can no longer be seen as ‘walled gardens’ within which learning and teaching activity is secure and protected.
17. Responses to this seem likely to include another surge in requests for in-person exams, calls for the implementation of new surveillance technologies, and a move away from online engagement and online courses – all of which have potential negative effects on our learning, teaching and assessment.
18. The cost and feasibility of agent detection and blocking ability within our LMS is currently unclear and there is currently no evidence that LMS providers are prioritising this as an issue.
19. Staff or students providing login credentials to an AI Agent may represent a wider security risk.
20. Agents do have potential as assistive technologies so student accessibility issues need to be kept in mind.