

Weekly AI in Higher Education Report - June 12, 2026

Executive Summary

AI and Grade Inflation: A new study from UC Berkeley found that courses with "AI-exposed" homework and coding tasks saw a 30% increase in 'A' grades since the arrival of ChatGPT, raising concerns about the validity of grades and prompting calls to review assessment methods rather than simply returning to in-person exams [1].

New Tools to Encourage Critical Thinking: OpenAI, in collaboration with Stanford academics, launched a "study mode" for ChatGPT. This feature uses Socratic questioning and scaffolding to encourage cognitive learning and active engagement, rather than just providing direct answers [2].

AI Marking Trials Show Complexities: A major UK trial led by Jisc revealed that retaining human oversight of AI marking is "more complex than one might initially think." The trial found that AI marking may not save time but could allow academics to offer richer, more detailed feedback, particularly for formative assessments [3].

Focusing on "ACTUAL" Intelligence: Experts are urging educators and technologists to rely on "ACTUAL intelligence" (agency, connection, trust, uniqueness, adaptability, and lifelong learning) to ensure AI enhances rather than replaces human judgment and relationships in higher education [4].

Federal Policy Recommendations: The White House released a National Policy Framework for AI, which includes legislative recommendations to educate Americans and develop an AI-ready workforce by affirmatively incorporating AI training into existing education and workforce programs [5].

Institutional Implementations: The University of Central Florida (UCF) demonstrated a successful "bottom-up" approach to AI integration, where faculty support units led the creation of resources, training, and a national conference, highlighting the effectiveness of grassroots initiatives in driving institutional AI strategy [6].

Workforce Adaptation: The 2026 EDUCAUSE Workforce Report highlights that higher education teams are adapting to AI and other pressures, but heavy workloads and competing priorities are limiting capacity for long-term strategic planning regarding AI adoption [7].

Major News and Developments

Grade Inflation Much Higher in 'AI-Exposed' Degrees

A working paper from the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley, analyzed grades from over 500,000 students between 2018 and 2025. The study found that in courses heavily reliant on homework and coding tasks where AI could substitute for student effort, the share of 'A' grades increased by 13 percentage points (or 30%) compared to a 2022 baseline [1]. The overall grade point average in these "high-homework" courses rose by 0.12 points [1].

The researcher, Igor Chirikov, cautioned against a wholesale return to in-person exams, noting that "many important skills cannot be assessed well in a short, controlled setting" [1]. Instead, he recommended that institutions review courses based on their exposure to AI and redesign assessments to balance assuring learning, protecting academic integrity, and preparing students for an AI-integrated professional world [1].

ChatGPT 'Study Mode' Feature Aims to Encourage Critical Thinking

In response to concerns about students relying too heavily on AI for answers, OpenAI launched a new "study mode" feature on ChatGPT [2]. Developed with academics from Stanford University, the tool "combines Socratic questioning, hints, and self-reflection prompts to guide understanding and promote active learning" [2].

James Donovan, head of education and cognitive outcomes research at OpenAI, explained that the tool focuses on improving cognitive outcomes and retention by triggering an internalisation process [2]. While acknowledging that the tool won't entirely prevent cheating, OpenAI hopes that the "thrill" of learning and achievement, along with the realization that using "study mode" leads to better long-term retention, will encourage students to use AI for self-improvement rather than mere productivity [2].

Retaining Human Oversight of AI Marking 'Complex', Trial Finds

Initial results from a major UK trial supported by Jisc, which explored the use of AI in assessment processes, highlighted a significant tension between using AI tools and maintaining academic oversight [3]. The trial required that a human retain oversight wherever AI was used to mark and give feedback.

However, the findings revealed that "keeping the human in the loop is more complex than one might initially think" and may not deliver the expected time savings [3]. There were concerns that academics might simply scan AI feedback without critical review [3]. Tom Moule, a senior AI specialist at Jisc, suggested that the value of AI marking lies

not in saving time, but in allowing academics to offer "richer", "more detailed", and "more timely" feedback [3]. The trial concluded that human oversight works best when intentionally designed into the workflow, with AI acting as a collaborator rather than a substitute, particularly in formative assessments [3].

Google VP: Students Finding Creative Ways to Use AI

Shantanu Sinha, Google's vice-president for education, stated that conversations around student cheating may be misguided [8]. He argued that students are using new technologies creatively and understand that simply copying AI answers is detrimental to their learning and long-term goals [8].

Google recently introduced a "guided learning" mode on Gemini, similar to ChatGPT's study mode, which acts as an electronic personal tutor [8]. Sinha suggested that the rise of AI highlights areas where universities can improve assessment effectiveness to drive critical thinking. He noted that if an assignment can be easily bypassed by looking things up, it might not be the best assignment [8].

Institutional Implementations

Building AI Initiatives with Bottom-Up Champions at UCF

An article in *EDUCAUSE Review* detailed how the University of Central Florida (UCF) successfully established an evolving campus infrastructure for GenAI through a bottom-up partnership [6]. The Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning (FCTL) and the Division of Digital Learning (DDL) took the initiative to create resources and programming before receiving administrative directives [6].

Their efforts included:

- Building a comprehensive faculty-facing webpage with guidance on LLMs, prompt engineering, and assessment [6].
- Forming an AI Community of Practice that grew to approximately fifty faculty and staff members [6].
- Cohosting workshops to help faculty reconsider assessment strategies [6].
- Launching a new national conference, "Teaching and Learning with AI (TLWAI)," which grew from 504 participants in 2023 to over 950 in 2025 [6].
- Developing asynchronous online courses for both faculty and students on GenAI applications and ethical considerations [6].

This grassroots approach was eventually supported by senior leadership, demonstrating how proactive staff can drive institutional change and establish comprehensive AI support structures [6].

Research and Studies

2026 EDUCAUSE Workforce Report

The 2026 EDUCAUSE Workforce Report examined how higher education technology and data professionals are adapting to rapid changes driven by AI, financial pressures, and shifting institutional priorities [7].

Key findings related to AI include:

- Institutions are heavily focused on responding to emerging technologies, especially AI [7].
- A strong majority of respondents indicated their team would need to support AI strategy and responsible use, but a majority also felt their team was only "somewhat prepared" to do so [7].
- Heavy workloads and the need to address immediate priorities are limiting the capacity for longer-term strategic work, including AI adoption planning [7].

2026 EDUCAUSE The Impact of AI on Learning Assessment Report

This report, based on a survey of 438 faculty and staff, explored how educators are responding to AI in practice [9].

Key takeaways include:

- Most surveyed faculty and staff use AI tools to create and administer assessments, and most believe students use AI tools while taking assessments [9].
- There is a clear need for more policies and guidelines to help students understand when and how to use AI tools for assessments [9].
- Developing AI literacy, including understanding when *not* to use AI tools, is considered essential for all students, faculty, and staff [9].

Policy and Guidelines Updates

White House National Policy Framework for Artificial Intelligence

In March 2026, the White House released a National Policy Framework for Artificial Intelligence, which includes legislative recommendations [5]. Section VI of the framework, "Educating Americans and Developing an AI-Ready Workforce," recommends that Congress use non-regulatory methods to ensure that existing education programs and workforce training affirmatively incorporate AI training [5]. It also suggests bolstering capabilities at land-grant institutions to develop AI youth development programs and provide technical assistance [5].

A Taxonomy of Harm for the AI Age

An opinion piece in *Inside Higher Ed* by Paul T. Corrigan proposed a "Taxonomy of Harm" to expand AI literacy efforts beyond basic concerns [10]. The taxonomy categorizes cognitive harms into three areas:

- **Slack:** Cognitive offloading that reduces understanding, speeds up forgetting, and atrophies skills [10].
- **Toxin:** Exposure to outdated, biased, or fabricated information that can change beliefs or manipulate actions [10].
- **Trash:** The homogenization of ideas and voice when writing with AI, leading to a loss of personal insight [10].

Corrigan argued that current AI literacy resources only address a fraction of these documented harms and urged educators to take them more seriously [10].

Emerging Trends

ACTUAL Intelligence: Centering the Human

An article in *EDUCAUSE Review* introduced the concept of "ACTUAL intelligence" as a necessary counterbalance to artificial intelligence [4]. Authors Donna Petherbridge and Sarah Egan Warren argued that educators and technologists must rely on key human capacities to ensure AI enhances rather than replaces human judgment [4].

The ACTUAL framework stands for:

- **Agency:** Preserving the capacity to think, reason, and act independently, guarding against "AI decay" [4].
- **Connection:** Recognizing that AI cannot replace the value of human interactions and community building [4].
- **Trust:** Building confidence through transparency, consistency, and a humanistic approach [4].
- **Uniqueness:** Celebrating the diverse skills, talents, and lived experiences of individuals [4].
- **Adaptability:** Remaining flexible and resilient in the face of rapid technological change [4].
- **Lifelong Learning:** Continuously updating skills and knowledge to navigate the evolving AI landscape [4].

Oral Assessments to Save the Take-Home Essay

As AI challenges the integrity of take-home essays, some educators are advocating for pairing written assignments with short oral exams [11]. Matthew Hammerton and Jacqueline Ho argued in *Inside Higher Ed* that rather than attempting to police AI usage, instructors should require students to demonstrate genuine understanding of their written work through brief (10-20 minute) intellectual conversations [11]. This approach disincentivizes outsourcing work to AI, preserves the pedagogical value of deep thinking required for essays, and fosters human connection in the classroom [11].

Source Links

- [1] [Grade inflation much higher in ‘AI-exposed’ degrees \(Times Higher Education\)](#)
- [2] [ChatGPT ‘study mode’ feature aims to encourage critical thinking \(Times Higher Education\)](#)
- [3] [Retaining human oversight of AI marking ‘complex’, trial finds \(Times Higher Education\)](#)
- [4] [ACTUAL Intelligence: Practitioner Perspectives on Centering the Human in the Age of AI \(EDUCAUSE Review\)](#)
- [5] [National Policy Framework for Artificial Intelligence Legislative Recommendations \(The White House\)](#)
- [6] [Building AI Initiatives with Bottom-Up Champions \(EDUCAUSE Review\)](#)
- [7] [2026 EDUCAUSE Workforce Report: How Teams Are Adapting to AI, External Pressures, and Strategic Change \(EDUCAUSE\)](#)
- [8] [Students finding ever more creative ways to use AI – Google VP \(Times Higher Education\)](#)
- [9] [The Impact of AI on Learning Assessment \(EDUCAUSE\)](#)
- [10] [A Taxonomy of Harm for the AI Age \(Inside Higher Ed\)](#)
- [11] [How to Save the Take-Home Essay With Oral Assessments \(Inside Higher Ed\)](#)