Alan Finkel Interview with Nadia Mitsopoulos
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Nadia: You may have seen the story in The Weekend Australian, by Ros Thomas, and her article said, "six senior academics in three states, estimated 80% of students are using AI, like ChatGPT, to cheat in exams, assessments, and essays."

And the concern is universities are failing to get on top of this. So what is it risk here? You'll hear from somebody from UWA shortly, but I want to start with Professor Alan Finkel, who is, among many things, a former chancellor at Monash University.

Good morning, professor. Thanks for joining me.

Has using AI to cheat become a bit of a free for all in the university sector? Has it become normalised?

Alan: Look, from all the reports it has become normalised. I don't think it's in every faculty. I certainly hope they're not cheating in the medical faculties, but, it has become very, very common. It's a real challenge for the universities. It's come on hard and it's come on fast.

Nadia: How has it been allowed to get so out of hand, so quickly?

Alan: Well, think about the last five or six years. Universities really did a fantastic job responding to COVID by providing online teaching and assessment, and students picked up on that, and they've sort of chosen to stay online. So we're in a new world now, where, yes, of course, there are students on campus, but a large fraction of the students are spending most of their time doing everything online.

And at the same time, ever since the end of 2022, beginning of 2023, we've had an explosion of rapidly more powerful chatbots that can read information off a screen, hear things in a phone call, and provide surreptitious answers, or just do an essay.

So, the ability to get perfect answers from chatbots, from artificial intelligence, coincided with this shift to online. I think the universities have been caught out.

Nadia: And have they become over reliant on online learning? Because I imagine there's cost benefits there too.

Alan: It's hard to say. I think they are probably over reliant on it. There are costs involving delivering online education, and in any event maintaining their campuses. So I'm not sure to what extent it's driven by cost as opposed to the expectations of students.

But when it comes to assessment, it really can't be allowed to continue online, because I've spoken to a lot of people, and no one can think of any way of achieving assured assessment, other than bringing the kids back to campus, or to centres

where there are supervisors, and making sure that assessment is in person, and supervised. And I'm not only talking about exams. Assessment might be in-class presentations, it could be moot courts, it could be lab presentations, or exam-condition assessments.

Nadia: So, Professor Alan Finkel, how much of the subject mark should then come from in-person, face-to-face assessments and teaching?

Alan: Well, that's a judgement call. My personal opinion is, you'd not want much less than 70% of the total mark for the year, for the course, to be from in-person assessment, and across that range of assessments, as I said, you know, classroom, lecture, or tutorial presentations, and exams, and moot courts, and other things. 30% during the year, with submissions, is important because you want the students to be motivated to do their work as they go. But you really can't trust it anymore.

Two things. I'd say that 70% of the final mark or thereabouts has to come from in-person supervised assessments. And the student has to pass that 70%. You certainly don't want a situation where they get 30 out of 30 for their online submissions, 20 out of 70 for their in-person. Now they've got 50 marks, but they clearly don't deserve to pass if they've only got 20 out of 70 for the in-person assessment. So it's a two-part thing: a substantial fraction, more than half; and you've got to pass that half.

Nadia: I wonder if you agree with what Professor Alan Finkel is saying this morning, former Chancellor of Monash University, and saying 70% of the subject mark for those at university should come from in-person supervised assessment. The good old days, if you like, because I imagine, and please give me a call, 1300 222 720, because professor, I imagine, the universities would argue, well, that'll mean a fair bit of investment. That will cost them money.

Alan: It will, certainly, during the transition, but it's worth it. We are through the universities trying to educate the workforce of the future.

Universities are very aware of the impact of AI, and a lot of them are trying to do the responsible thing by teaching students how to use AI and how to use it responsibly. But it's unlike any other subject. Students don't really need to be taught AI. They've worked it out themselves

To be a competent employee, you need to know your subject matter, so that you can then pull in the AI and use it effectively.

Nadia: Because if this continues down this path, and we're going to hear from somebody from UWA in a moment, because they actually don't use an AI tool to detect AI, where a lot of universities do. UWA doesn't and they'll tell us why.

But if we continue down this path, you could then start questioning the value of a degree. You know, does someone actually have the skills that your degree says you have? if you've relied so heavily on artificial intelligence to get through?

Alan: There's no question, if you're hearing about the problem, all you're listeners are hearing about the problem, all the employers have heard about the problem. So if they're seeing a degree that's just recently given to an applicant for a job, they have to doubt the merit of that degree. Now, some employers will know some universities as doing the right thing, but it won't be generally known.

So, universities are going to have to do two things. They're going to have to really tighten the way they do things with in-person assessment, and let it be known that they've made that transition.

Nadia: Is it easy to detect AI? There are AI tools, and some universities do use them. But as UWA will tell us, they say that they're actually often, you know, create false results and they're not that reliable. How reliable are they?

Alan: Reasonably, especially if you use a large number of the tools and look at the averages in an intelligent way. Quite independently of the university, I've started a company called Proudly Human Corporation, which is assessing books and music and podcasts, even online media, for human, generated content, and certifying that they're human generated.
Is it easy?
No.
Can we do it?
Yes.

Nadia: I'll leave it there. Good to talk to you, Professor. Thanks for your time.

Alan: Okay, take care, thanks.