

# The Master's Degree That Teaches You Not to Ask

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Somewhere on a university's continuing-education website this week, a prospective student is reading about a new credential. It might be called a Master of Applied AI, or a certificate in AI fluency, or a professional badge in generative tools for the workplace. The brochure promises something reassuring: you will learn to *use* this technology, to become conversant in it, to gain an edge—and, crucially, you will not need to know how to code, and you will not need mathematics. The organization that helps universities build and market exactly these programs, the University Professional and Continuing Education Association, maintains a hub devoted to "applied AI" for online and professional learners, a clearinghouse of the field's fastest-growing product line [28]. Read the language carefully and you notice what it is offering. Not comprehension. Fluency. Not the capacity to interrogate a system, but the competency to operate one.

[28] UPCEA AI Hub: Applied AI for Online & Professional ...

This is the characteristic gesture of the university in the AI moment, and it deserves to be named for what it is. Faced with a technology that unsettles the very foundations of what higher education claims to do—produce and certify knowledge, teach people to reason, distinguish real understanding from its imitation—the institution has largely declined to face the unsettlement. Instead it has done what institutions under pressure reliably do: it has converted an existential question into a product. It has taken the anxiety swirling around large language models and metabolized it into degree programs, into "responsible integration" guides, into governance frameworks and critical-thinking modules. Each of these artifacts performs a kind of mastery over the situation. Each purports to democratize a powerful tool, to make citizens of the AI economy out of the enrolled. And each, on inspection, trains students to manage the technology rather than to ask hard questions of it.

I want to map what happened in a single week of higher-education discourse about AI, because the map tells a coherent story. The players are familiar—faculty, administrators, students, the vendors and consultants who circle both—and their positions are increasingly legible. What emerges is not a debate between optimists and skeptics. It is a slow substitution, in which the institution's governance response

to AI has outrun and displaced its pedagogical one, and in which the language of access and empowerment does the quiet work of funneling students toward a managed relationship with a technology they are never actually taught to question.

### *The Degree as a Product Category*

Start with the credential itself, because it is the purest expression of the substitution. A Master of Applied AI, or its many cousins, is marketed as an educational response to a technological shift. It is more honestly understood as a market response wearing educational clothes. The tell is in the promise of fluency without foundations. When the University of Sydney’s teaching center asks what education should look like in the age of AI, it frames the problem seriously—as a question about the purpose of a degree when the outputs a degree once certified can be generated on demand [29]. That is the question. But the credential market answers a different one. It answers the workforce’s anxiety—*will I be employable?*—with a purchasable reassurance, and in doing so it quietly narrows what AI education could mean down to what AI training can sell.

[29] What Should Education Look Like in the Age of AI?

Notice the rhetorical engine that drives this: *democratization*. The claim is that these programs open a rarefied technical domain to the non-technical, that they take AI out of the hands of the engineers and put it into everyone’s. It is a genuinely appealing claim, and it is also a contestable one dressed up as an obvious good. Because what “democratizing AI” turns out to mean, in practice, is teaching people to be competent operators of systems they neither built nor understand nor can meaningfully contest. The community-college sector has embraced this framing wholesale; the influential task-force report on building “the AI-enabled community college” treats AI fluency as a workforce imperative, a matter of preparing students for jobs that will require them to work alongside these tools [15]. There is nothing wrong with workforce preparation. But when democratization is redefined as *access to a managed relationship*, it stops being emancipatory and starts being a recruitment funnel—one that routes students, at scale, toward the existing pipelines of the computer-science and platform economy without ever equipping them to ask who owns those pipelines or what they extract.

[15] PDF Creating the AI-Enabled Community College

The deeper problem is what “fluency” hides. To reduce a large language model to a handful of foundational principles you can master in a semester—prompt well, verify outputs, understand hallucination, deploy responsibly—is to sell managerial competence as if it were

understanding. It is the difference between knowing how to drive a car and knowing how a car is made, insured, powered, and priced, and who is harmed along its supply chain. Kate Crawford’s argument in [21] is precisely that we cannot understand these systems if we treat them as “a purely technical domain,” because AI is at a fundamental level a set of “technical and social practices, institutions and infrastructures, politics and culture.” A curriculum that teaches fluency-without-foundations does the opposite. It severs the technical operation from its planetary and political substrate and hands the student the operation alone. The graduate emerges able to produce a marketing plan with a chatbot and unable to say a single critical word about the extraction, the labor, or the concentration of power that made the chatbot possible. That is not democratization. That is the production of product managers.

### *Neutrality as a Performance*

If the degree is the product, the guide is its accompanying literature—and the guides this week are worth reading as documents of institutional self-protection. Universities and ministries have produced an extraordinary volume of “responsible integration” material: Quebec’s government guide to the responsible integration of AI in higher-education institutions runs to a full framework of principles and cautions [19], while UQAM’s practical guide focuses specifically on equity and inclusion in AI-mediated teaching [17]. France’s national report on AI and higher education—subtitled, tellingly, *training, structuring, and appropriation by society*—treats the whole matter as one of orderly institutional absorption [16]. These are careful, well-meaning documents. They are also performances of neutrality, and the performance is where the ideology hides.

Consider first the definitions. Institutional guides and the critical-thinking courses that accompany them lean heavily on framings of AI inherited from an earlier era—the model as an “imitation of human behavior,” the anthropomorphic language that has trailed the field since the Turing test. It is worth pausing on how strange this is as a pedagogical choice, because it smuggles a whole metaphysics in through a definition. UNESCO’s competency framework for teachers, a foundational reference text for much of this guidance, is careful in one direction and revealing in another: it warns that generative systems are “more likely to be stochastic in generating outputs or predictions,” that identical inputs may yield different outputs, and that the content is therefore “potentially less trustworthy, especially for the teaching of factual and conceptual knowledge” [21]. This is

[21] The Atlas of AI

[19] PDF Intégration responsable de l’IA dans les établissements d’enseignement ...

[17] PDF Guide pratique - collimateur.uqam.ca

[16] PDF Formation Structuration Et Appropriation Par La Societe

[21] AI competency framework for teachers - UNESCO

genuinely useful. But notice that even here the framing keeps AI on the terrain of a knowledge-producing agent whose trustworthiness we assess, rather than a statistical artifact of scraped human text whose *provenance* we might interrogate. The definition performs neutrality while pre-deciding what kind of thing we are dealing with.

Then there is the disciplinary hierarchy, which the guides rarely acknowledge but consistently enact. When institutions reach for a model of “evidence” against which to measure AI’s reliability, they overwhelmingly borrow from the health sciences—the randomized trial, the systematic review, the hierarchy of evidence that governs clinical medicine. The scholarly literature that universities cite to legitimate their AI policies reflects this: the large systematic mapping of generative AI’s impact in higher education adopts exactly the evidentiary conventions of a biomedical review [12], and Tec de Monterrey’s influential vision document assembles its authority in the same idiom of surveyed evidence and best practice [18]. This is not neutral either. Privileging health-science evidence quietly tells the sculpture professor, the historian, the philosopher that their disciplinary ways of knowing—interpretation, critique, the close reading of a source—are not really *evidence* about AI at all, that the serious questions belong to the empiricists. It is a hierarchy of knowledge masquerading as rigor, and it disqualifies precisely the humanistic questioning that AI most urgently demands.

The MIT Press primer on AI ethics gestures at the alternative that these guides suppress. It imagines building ethical reflection into the very meaning of “doing AI”—“a more diverse and holistic kind of *Bildung*,” a training “more radically interdisciplinary and pluralistic with regard to methods and approaches” [21]. That is what a genuinely educational response would look like: not a neutral guide that tells you how to use the tool responsibly, but a formation that refuses to separate the using from the questioning. The institutional guides do the opposite. They perform balance, cite the evidence, offer the caveats—and in the performance, they train the reader to accept the technology’s arrival as a fact to be managed rather than a claim to be examined.

### *The Governance Response That Ate the Pedagogical One*

The most quantifiable feature of this week’s discourse is an imbalance. There is a great deal of governance and very little pedagogy. Universities have responded to AI overwhelmingly through the machinery of policy—frameworks, task forces, Delphi panels, ecosystem maps—

[12] Mapping the impact of generative AI in higher education: a ... - Frontiers

[18] PDF Inteligencia Artificial Generativa en la Educación Superior: Una Visión ...

[21] AI Ethics - The MIT Press Essential Knowledge series

and comparatively little through the harder, slower work of rethinking what and how they teach. The flagship example is the global Delphi study on governing generative AI in higher education, which convened experts across continents to build consensus on governance principles [9]. Alongside it sits WCET’s sprawling AI education policy and practice ecosystem framework, an attempt to map the entire institutional terrain of decisions, roles, and responsibilities [13]. Brazilian scholarship has produced institutional analyses framed explicitly around organizational “transformation” [5]. The volume is remarkable. The genre is uniform. It is the genre of the institution managing itself.

Governance is not worthless. An institution genuinely needs to decide how AI touches assessment, privacy, and academic integrity. But the sheer preponderance of governance over pedagogy tells you where the institutional anxiety actually lives. It lives in liability, in reputation, in the orderly maintenance of the credential’s value—not in the classroom. When a university produces its fifth policy framework and its first serious redesign of a course, it has revealed its priorities. The governance documents allow leadership to demonstrate that *something is being done* without confronting the thing that governance cannot fix: the possibility that the standard undergraduate assessment, the essay and the take-home exam and the problem set, no longer measures what it claims to measure, and that no policy will restore that measurement.

There are voices in the discourse naming this gap. One widely circulated argument holds that the missing piece of higher education’s AI response is *adaptive*—that institutions keep reaching for static policies when the situation demands continuous pedagogical adaptation [22]. Hollis Robbins, writing from inside university administration, put the institutional reluctance most bluntly: universities, she argued, would simply *prefer not to*—prefer not to reckon with what AI does to their core function, and so retreat into procedure [27]. The Bartleby allusion is exact. The institution has looked at the disruption, declined to engage its substance, and produced instead a great deal of paperwork about engagement.

This is where the governance-versus-pedagogy imbalance connects back to the credential. A Master of Applied AI is, in a sense, governance solving a pedagogy problem by selling around it. Rather than answer the question of what a degree should certify in a world where outputs are cheap, the institution launches a new degree that certifies *fluency in producing those outputs*. The problem is not solved; it is repackaged as a product and sold to the very students it has failed to educate about the technology’s stakes. Alvin Toffler, surveying an earlier wave of technological displacement in [21], argued that compet-

[9] Governing generative AI in higher education: a global Delphi ... - Springer

[13] PDF 2025 AI Education Policy & Practice Ecosystem Framework

[5] Análise institucional para a transformação

[22] The missing piece of higher education’s AI response: Adaptive ...

[27] Universities would prefer not to. - by Hollis Robbins

[21] After Shock

ing in a global technology race would require “innovative educational approaches” built around genuinely interdisciplinary, project-based formation that brings humanists and engineers together on real problems. What the governance response offers instead is the appearance of innovation—new credentials, new frameworks—layered over an unchanged conception of what education is for.

### *What the Cheating Wars Actually Reveal*

Nowhere is the avoided question more visible than in the phenomenon the press has taken to calling the campus “cheating wars”—and nowhere is the institution’s flight from pedagogy into control more naked. The eruptions this week were dramatic. Mexico’s largest public university, the UNAM, ordered fifty-eight thousand students to retake an exam after its AI-proctoring system failed to hold its first remote sitting, a fiasco that ballooned into a crisis touching more than 158,000 examinations and became a national scandal [25]. Spanish-language coverage traced how a technical failure in a surveillance apparatus escalated into “one of the university’s greatest crises in years” [26], and Mexican commentators framed the episode itself as a scandal of the exam, not merely of the students [1]. Meanwhile at Brown, a professor publicly suspected that most of his class had used AI to cheat [6], an accusation that reached the Spanish press as a warning that “academic integrity is in danger” [24].

The institutional reflex, faced with this, has been surveillance and accusation. Reporting from inside the American cheating wars describes “extreme surveillance, false accusations, jarring confusion”—an arms race of proctoring software and detection tools that treats students as suspects [11]. In California, students falsely accused of using AI have begun to push back, contesting charges built on the flimsy evidence of detection tools that do not work [8]. The disputes are now migrating into the courts; a tracker of AI-cheating lawsuits catalogs the growing docket of cases and their outcomes [3], and legal scholarship has begun weighing academic integrity against student rights in the proctoring regime [14]. The University of Chicago’s law school responded to the whole mess by banning laptops from first-year classrooms as part of a sweeping new AI strategy—a return to the handwritten as a form of control [23].

Even the most reform-minded response—the widely reported turn away from detection toward redesigned assessment—confirms the diagnosis rather than escaping it. The abandonment of AI detectors in favor of “new approaches” to assessment is real progress [4], and it

[25] UNAM orders 58,000 retakes after AI proctoring failed to hold its first remote exam

[26] UNAM: 158.000 exámenes en entredicho: la mayor universidad pública de ...

[1] El escándalo de los exámenes de la UNAM es una ...

[6] Brown Professor Suspects Most of His Class Used AI to Cheat

[24] Un catedrático español denuncia fraude masivo con IA en un examen en la ...

[11] Inside college AI cheating wars: extreme surveillance, false ...

[8] Falsely accused of using AI, California college students push back as ...

[3] AI Cheating Lawsuits Tracker — Every Case, Who Won (2026)

[14] PDF AI Proctoring: Academic Integrity vs. Student Rights

[23] UChicago Law Bans Laptops from 1L Classrooms As Part of Sweeping New AI ...

[4] AI Detectors Are Out, New Assessments Are In

is more intelligent than surveillance. But look at what motivates it. The reform is driven by the failure of the *policing* apparatus, not by a positive reconception of what the university is for. Assessment is being redesigned to be more cheating-resistant, to close the loophole, to restore the integrity of the credential. The question underneath—*what does this credential now certify, and is that thing still worth certifying in the old way?*—remains unasked. The cheating wars, in other words, are the epistemic and political disruption the institution has spent all its degree programs and governance frameworks trying not to face, erupting anyway, in the form the institution is least equipped to handle: not as a policy problem, but as a collapse of trust between teachers and the taught.

### *The Question Underneath the Panic*

Strip away the surveillance and the credentials and you reach the actual disruption, which is epistemic. Generative AI does not merely make cheating easier; it destabilizes the university's claim to be an authority over knowledge—who produces it, who verifies it, who is licensed to speak. A serious body of scholarship has begun to name this directly, examining human agency and epistemic authority under generative AI and asking what happens to the student's own claim to know something when a machine can produce a more fluent version of it on demand [10]. This is the question the Master of Applied AI is built to avoid. It is far easier to sell fluency in operating the system than to sit with the possibility that the system erodes the ground on which the whole enterprise of certified expertise stands.

[10] Human Agency and Epistemic Authority Under Generative ...

The evidence that something has genuinely shifted is not only anecdotal. Teachers report, and researchers increasingly document, that heavy reliance on generative tools may be degrading the underlying capacity the university exists to build—that students, in the alarming formulation of one widely shared report, increasingly “can’t reason,” that offloading cognition to a machine is fueling a crisis in the ability to think [20]. One should hold such claims skeptically—every generation of educators has feared that the new medium is rotting young minds, and the pattern of moral panic is old. But the underlying mechanism here is not implausible, and it points at exactly the thing the credential market cannot address. If the tool erodes the capacity, then a degree that certifies fluency with the tool while neglecting the capacity is certifying a hollowed-out competence.

[20] Students can’t reason: Teachers warn AI is fueling a ... - Fortune

What is most striking in the student-facing research is the culture of silence the institution has produced. A vivid arXiv study captured

it in its title: "Everyone's using it, but no one is allowed to talk about it"—students awash in AI, using it constantly, forbidden by the terms of the integrity regime from acknowledging that use openly [2]. This is the true cost of the surveillance response. By treating AI as a threat to be policed rather than a condition to be understood together, the institution has driven the actual practice underground and made honest pedagogical conversation about it nearly impossible. The student cannot ask her professor how to think well with these tools, because to admit using them is to confess. The professor cannot teach the judgment the student needs, because the frame is prosecutorial. The very partnership that might turn AI into an occasion for genuine education—faculty and students working out together what good intellectual practice looks like now—is foreclosed by the institution's decision to govern rather than to teach.

That missing partnership framing is the hole at the center of the week's discourse. Almost nowhere in the mountain of governance documents and credential brochures is AI treated as a shared problem for a learning community to reason through collaboratively. The stakes reach well beyond the campus. The Jesuit social-justice network's report on "work without workers" situates the whole educational question inside a larger reckoning with what AI does to employment and human dignity [30], a reckoning the French edition frames in the same terms of labor and society [7]. These are exactly the questions a Master of Applied AI could put at its center—what is this technology doing to work, to knowledge, to power—and exactly the questions it is structured to leave out, because a program that asks them cannot promise the frictionless employability that sells the seats.

### *The Institution That Prefers Not To*

There is a version of the AI response that would take the disruption seriously. It would treat the students falsely accused in California not as collateral damage in a policing operation but as evidence that the detection paradigm is broken and the trust relationship needs rebuilding [8]. It would read the UNAM debacle not as a technical glitch to be patched but as a warning about outsourcing the university's judgment to surveillance vendors [26]. It would build the interdisciplinary, ethically saturated formation that both the MIT Press ethicists and Toffler's project-based vision point toward [21], rather than the frictionless fluency the market rewards. And it would insist, with Crawford, that no one has been educated about AI who has been taught only to operate it and never to see the "highly organized capital backed by vast systems of extraction" that it is [21].

[2] Everyone's using it, but no one is allowed to talk about it: College ...

[30] Work without workers? Artificial intelligence, employment ...

[7] Du travail sans travailleurs ? Intelligence artificielle, emploi ...

[8] Falsely accused of using AI, California college students push back as ...

[26] UNAM: 158.000 exámenes en entredicho: la mayor universidad pública de ...

[21] AI Ethics - The MIT Press Essential Knowledge series

[21] The Atlas of AI

That version exists mostly as a road not taken. The institution has instead chosen the path of least existential discomfort. It has turned the AI moment into a product line and a policy binder. It has sold competency and called it understanding. It has performed neutrality in its guides while smuggling in a metaphysics and a hierarchy of who gets to know. It has poured its energy into governing itself and its students, and comparatively little into the harder question of whether its central promise—we will teach you to think, and certify that you can—still means what it meant. The reform-minded turn from detection to better assessment is welcome, and the scholars naming the epistemic stakes are doing the work the institution as a whole avoids [10]. But the dominant move remains the one Hollis Robbins named: the institution would prefer not to [27].

The Master of Applied AI, then, is not a scandal. It is worse than a scandal; it is a symptom, and a comfortable one. It gives everyone what they want. The student gets a credential and a feeling of safety. The administration gets tuition and a demonstration of responsiveness. The vendor gets a market. Nobody has to sit with the vertiginous question the technology actually poses, which is whether a machine that can imitate the products of thought forces us to become far clearer than we have ever been about what thinking is for and why a person should still learn to do it. The degree is engineered to make that question unnecessary. It teaches you to prompt, to verify, to deploy, to be fluent and employable and calm. It teaches you, in the end, not to ask. And an institution whose oldest and only real justification is the cultivation of the capacity to ask should recognize, in that silence, the sound of its own nerve failing.

[10] Human Agency and Epistemic Authority Under Generative ...

[27] Universities would prefer not to. - by Hollis Robbins

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