

Drawing on her work at the Stockholm School of Economics, Dr. Charlotte von Essen joins Dr. Brent Duckor and Dr. Carrie Holmberg to examine how generative AI is reshaping faculty practice, student learning, institutional responsibility, and the purpose of higher education itself.

Learning to Learn in the AI-Mediated University

Generative AI entered higher education differently from earlier waves of educational technology. Universities could adopt learning management systems, online degrees, and massive open online courses gradually. AI has not offered the same luxury. Students began using it before many institutions had policies or faculty support. As von Essen puts it, this change has been “enforced on us,” leaving universities to respond while the technology continues to evolve.

That pressure can make the AI conversation feel like a race to master tools. Dr. Von Essen offers a more useful frame. The central task is not to turn every faculty member into a technologist. It is to help educators preserve judgment, strengthen pedagogy, and redesign learning for a world in which AI is already part of students’ academic and professional lives.

Public thinking in a rapidly changing field

Von Essen uses LinkedIn to think in public, sharing research summaries, workplace reflections, and observations from students and educators. The platform lets her join a conversation moving too quickly for journal articles and conferences alone.

This public scholarship is especially valuable in a polarized field. AI discussions often split into promotion and rejection: transformation or hollowing out. Von Essen avoids both postures. She focuses on what educators are seeing “on the ground” and on questions that can move the conversation forward, even by half a step.

AI is also reshaping social media. Synthetic posts, automated comments, and what von Essen calls “AI slop” make authentic exchange harder to identify. Educators need spaces for difficult questions that are not reduced to marketing, fear, or ideological certainty.

Faculty need support, not another mandate

Dr. von Essen notes: “The world has changed. We're in a new educational reality. [We are in a] sort of muddy, sticky world. Let's work it out together kind of phase. At least here [in Sweden], at least where I work... There's a lot of ways to go right now, but I'm going to stick with faculty expertise, faculty pedagogical content knowledge, faculty dispositions towards improving their practice.”

One of the clearest trends von Essen sees is AI fatigue. Faculty members are tired of a conversation that circles the same anxieties while leaving them to determine, largely on their own, what to do next. Some worry they are falling behind; others feel pressure to redesign courses without adequate support.

The Stockholm School of Economics has responded by creating a culture of safe experimentation. Von Essen offers individual consultations and a weekly 30-minute “AI Breakfast Club,” where she demonstrates a workflow, shares a prompt, or explains a model update. The aim is to make experimentation manageable.

Higher education often responds to innovation with broad guidance or generic prompt libraries. But faculty do not need identical solutions. They bring different expertise, teaching strengths, and course designs. AI's educational value depends on how it is fitted to those differences.

Used well, AI may support the system surrounding teaching rather than substitute for teaching itself. Faculty might use it to prepare for class, draft materials in their instructional voice, or examine whether assessments align with learning objectives. Von Essen describes using AI to review a course through the lens of constructive alignment, asking whether each intended outcome is actually assessed. The tool provides a second opinion, but the educator remains responsible for interpretation and decisions.

The goal is not a cheaper version of education. It is to reduce friction so faculty have more capacity for work requiring expertise, relationships, and judgment. When faculty can organize courses more coherently and prepare better resources, students receive the downstream benefit. In this account, AI's promise is not the automation of education but stronger conditions for good teaching.

“There is no way to avoid it now. It's here. The world has changed.”

The limits of institution-wide consistency

AI adoption also exposes the fragmented structure of universities. Business and STEM programs may move quickly because the industries they serve are already being transformed by AI. Arts

and humanities departments may be more cautious, in part because essays, take-home papers, sustained reading, and original interpretation sit close to the center of their work.

Universities often leave departments to “figure it out” independently. Students may encounter one course that encourages AI, another that restricts it, and a third that offers no guidance. They are left asking not only whether AI is allowed, but how it affects learning.

Von Essen does not insist that every discipline adopt the same practices. Complete consistency may be unrealistic. But institutions owe students a more coherent response than a patchwork of individual rules. The danger is that universities settle for the least demanding common denominator: plagiarism policies, AI detection, and enforcement. Those responses avoid the harder questions. What uses of AI are productive in a particular field? What should excellence look like when AI is involved? Which capacities should students demonstrate independently?

These are questions of curriculum and assessment, not merely compliance.

A Scandinavian balancing act

From Stockholm, Dr. von Essen sees both the urgency and the risks of AI preparation. Scandinavia has a vibrant technology ecosystem, and business schools can see how AI is changing the jobs graduates enter. Universities cannot prepare students for that world by pretending the technology does not exist.

At the same time, AI readiness cannot mean teaching students only to operate the newest tools. Graduates need enough AI literacy to participate in changing workplaces, but they also need the cognitive foundations to work without AI. The challenge is to integrate technical capability while strengthening judgment, communication, resilience, and other durable or human skills.

This balance is complicated by the uneven preparation of incoming students. Some arrive with extensive AI experience; others have little. Some can afford premium tools, while others rely on free or institutionally provided versions. Even frequent use does not necessarily indicate meaningful literacy. A student may generate a polished product without knowing how to use AI to test an idea, challenge an assumption, or deepen thinking.

Universities, von Essen observes, do not yet have reliable ways to assess that baseline. They are often “working in the dark.”

Access introduces another paradox. Institutions may provide approved tools to promote equity and protect data, yet students may avoid them because they fear surveillance. Moving work to privately purchased tools creates equity and security concerns. The safer option can still fail to earn trust.

What should children encounter, and when?

The conversation becomes harder when it moves to children's development. Policies limiting AI use for younger students reflect legitimate concerns about foundational skills, cognitive development, privacy, and overreliance. Von Essen understands the desire to protect time for handwriting, reading physical books, learning multiplication facts, playing, and discovering without technological mediation.

She also doubts that schools can simply wall AI off. It is already embedded in search engines, software, homes, and older siblings' lives. Banning a tool at school does not mean children will not encounter it elsewhere.

Von Essen describes her mixed reaction when her young daughter brought home a school activity involving AI. Her daughter had uploaded a drawing, applied a filter, and evaluated the result, noting what the system changed and what she disliked. Von Essen worried about data and early exposure, yet recognized that her daughter had practiced an important process: create, compare, evaluate, and judge.

That experience points toward what von Essen calls a “staggered, scaffolded, sensible, critical integration.” Students should develop confidence that they can work both with and without AI.

Dr. von Essen observing her own child's experiences in Sweden notes: “[When younger students] can have the confidence to know they can do things with or without AI. That's what I think is for me is like the North Star...that they can work on their own, but then they know when they can use that tool to basically to go further or to challenge or to go deeper.”

They should learn when a tool extends thinking and when it interrupts the productive struggle through which learning occurs. Deciding when and how to use AI is a pedagogical judgment grounded in developmental understanding, not a decision technology companies should make by default.

Redesigning programs around educatability

Looking ahead, von Essen expects universities to reconsider both what and how they teach. Programs must examine whether their learning outcomes still prepare graduates for the world they are entering. AI will appear more explicitly in fields such as finance and entrepreneurship, but the more consequential change may be a renewed focus on the ability to learn.

Von Essen uses the term “educatability” to describe this capacity. Technical skills become outdated quickly. The ability to learn, unlearn, adapt, and make sense of unfamiliar conditions

lasts longer. In an unstable labor market, learning how to learn may become the most valuable capability universities cultivate.

Executive education will also expand as workers seek preparation they never received in formal degree programs. But the strongest programs will not simply teach professionals which buttons to press. They will help people evaluate tools, acquire new knowledge, and combine human expertise with technological capacity.

This shift may not diminish the value of higher education. It could increase demand for high-quality knowledge work. When AI can produce adequate responses quickly, human value may lie in perspective, discernment, creativity, and recognizing what a generic answer misses. Universities have long claimed to develop those capacities. AI pressures them to demonstrate that they do.

Crystal ball predictions offered about the meaning of literacy

The hosts' own forecasts sharpened the stakes. Dr. Duckor warned that AI may accelerate the decline of deep reading as students ask systems to summarize texts—or decide whether a primary source is worth reading at all. Holmberg predicted that developmentally appropriate AI use will become a major public debate, producing new guidance and coalitions concerned with protecting young learners.

Duckor pressed deeper: “If I was going to summarize it in a neat way. Since we all have our crystal ball, Carrie, I'll defer to you in a minute with your crystal ball observation or prediction, but here's mine, and it comes straight out of the Atlantic published on July 8th, 2026, with the catchy title "[The End of Reading is Here.](#)”

Duckor continued: “So if I was to pull up my crystal ball, I would say that the trending downwards on reading as we have known it for the generations that have come before the age of AI, is in pointing the direction that the Atlantic is somewhat alarmistly claiming, and that is that we have been moving more and more from a world of text as something to be encountered in any kind of a productive struggle, to text to be synthesized and summarized at my fingertips instantaneously, to now text that will be read by other bots for me to tell me whether I should even bother to read the primary text. So I think when I think about reading, reading literacy has been a great debate.

“There's something called “The Reading Wars” in K-12 reform in the U.S.” he continued “It's a story of what kind of best approaches to reading will help to increase reading literacy. It's almost as if those two claims are about whether we're doing phonics or whether we're doing whole language, have been mooted by the paradigm shift of AI in mediated spaces in education, because it won't really matter much the method.

Duckor said: “What's going to matter, I think more and more is whether young people bother to read, reread or slow down to read much of anything that would have been called a primary source in a previous generation. So for me, the most interesting thing about talking about when you mentioned, like, you know, times tables, let's call that numeracy. And then we think about literacy as reading or oral communication and all the ways you could define literacies.

“This is one area that is under siege and it is not because of AI: That would be a huge misconception,” he said.

Duckor noted that: “AI has only accelerated a trend that began with social media and with other forms of synthesizing and summarizing digital technologies. So I don't know how you read Shakespeare anymore. I don't know how you read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I don't know how you even read James Baldwin. Because you're in a world now --and this is why the humanities people may be resisting, as we said earlier, more than we've imagined I think, because for good reason they sense that their bread and butter, what they've tried to communicate to young people as valuable—that is the act of reading and reading consistently, deeply, productively—is gone.”

Traditional assessment can no longer remain untouched

The webinar hosts and panelists agreed: Traditional grading systems are already strained by AI-generated work. When students can produce polished assignments with similar tools, grades may cluster and reveal less about differences in understanding. That does not mean grades will disappear soon. It does mean questions long raised by assessment reformers are becoming impossible for higher education to ignore.

AI could make richer, more personalized feedback and narrative evaluation easier to produce at scale. Yet technology alone cannot solve the problem. Grades also function as signals used by employers and graduate programs to rank candidates. Replacing them requires not only a new feedback system but a new agreement about how achievement should be represented and compared.

Universities cannot treat AI as an add-on to unchanged systems. It reaches into course design, faculty labor, disciplinary identity, access, privacy, assessment, and the value of a degree.

Von Essen's response is neither to surrender education to AI nor to defend every existing practice against it. Her approach begins with supported experimentation, disciplinary expertise, and honest attention to tradeoffs. Universities should help faculty and students develop the judgment to know when AI deepens learning, when it merely accelerates production, and when it should be set aside.

That may be the defining educational task of the next decade: not simply teaching people to use AI, but preparing them to remain capable, critical learners in its presence.

Recommended citation: Duckor, B., Holmberg, C., & ChatGPT. (2026, July 23). The Future of AI-mediated Higher Education: Global Perspectives from Sweden and Beyond. [Webinar summary]. Innovation in Applied Education Policy (IAEP) Center, San José State University.