Who am I in the AI era?

No one prepared you to compete with artificial intelligence. ***Doris Wai*** *talks to a clinical counsellor about finding confidence and your identity when tech becomes a threat*

BACKGROUND: AI AND IDENTITY

For many teenagers, especially in Hong Kong and from similar school-minded cultures, your identity might be closely tied to your academic achievements like test scores and class rankings. That might mean your final grade matters more than proof that you have learned something. AI helps many students get the results they want, at the cost of their development and journey. And for many, that includes their personal identity and confidence.



You have spent years at your desk. You have done past papers, sat practice exams and endured extra classes on weekends.

Then, almost overnight, an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot can do all of it in about a minute.

For a generation of teenagers across Asia raised on rankings and results, this is not just inconvenient. It is a threat to their identity.

Justine Campbell, a licensed clinical counsellor who works with young people across the region, has watched this play out with her teen clients.

"Most of the teenagers I work with have never been asked who they are," she said.

"They've only ever been asked what they can do. Those are completely different questions, and only one of them will hold up when things get hard."



Justine Campbell is a licensed clinical counsellor. Photo: Handout

In cultures where academic performance functions almost as a moral category, and where exam results and university placements carry the weight of personal worth, this distinction matters enormously.

For years, the measure of a child was how they compared with other students.

That standard has now shifted in a way no teacher or parent quite prepared anyone for.

"Now, they are comparing themselves to a machine that never gets tired, never makes human mistakes and knows more than any person possibly can," Campbell said. "If your identity was built on being the smartest person in the room, AI doesn't just challenge that. It dismantles it."

What remains is an uncomfortable question that high-achievement culture rarely makes room for: who am I when I am not performing?

The problem with short cuts

When a student uses AI to generate an essay, they receive a finished product in minutes, What they do not receive is the experience of getting there. That distinction, Campbell argued, is precisely what is being lost.

"The frustration of not knowing how to start, the moment something finally clicks, the experience of turning a half-formed thought into something real: these are not inconveniences on the way to a result. They are the entire point," she said.

The consequences of skipping that process are more serious than most students realise.

"If these important steps in writing, even [just] an essay, are removed, you are left with a teenager who wilts at the first sign of difficulty, with no experience of working through confusion and no sense of their own competence," Campbell stressed.

The dependency that follows is self-reinforcing and quiet, Campbell said. Without the experience of struggle and recovery, students begin to believe they cannot accomplish anything without help: "The cruel reality is that the more they rely on AI to avoid feeling incapable, the more incapable they actually become. It is a loop that tightens quietly over time."

How to tell when it's a problem

It is not always obvious. Campbell suggested trying to notice how you feel when you work on your own. If sitting down without AI makes you anxious or feel like you are unable to begin, that is worth paying attention to.

If your own ability to come up with ideas, structure an argument or write an original sentence now feels foreign without assistance, something has shifted. And if you find yourself trusting the machine more than your own instincts, that is a major red flag.

"The question I ask is simple," the counsellor said. "Are you using AI to go further than you could alone? Or are you using it to avoid finding out what you are capable of? One of those is a tool. The other is a hiding place."

Finding yourself

It is important to build tolerance for the discomfort of not knowing. Campbell suggested starting small: sit with the blank page without reaching for help for five minutes, then 10. Write down everything you already know about a subject before looking anything up. She added, "Most teenagers are genuinely surprised by how much they actually know when they stop outsourcing the first move."

In cultures that reward the fastest, most accurate answer, this feels counterintuitive. But that discomfort, the pause, the uncertainty, the slow work of thinking for yourself, is not the obstacle. It is the point.

"The question is not whether you use [AI]. The question is whether you still exist when you put it down," she said.

THINK ABOUT IT

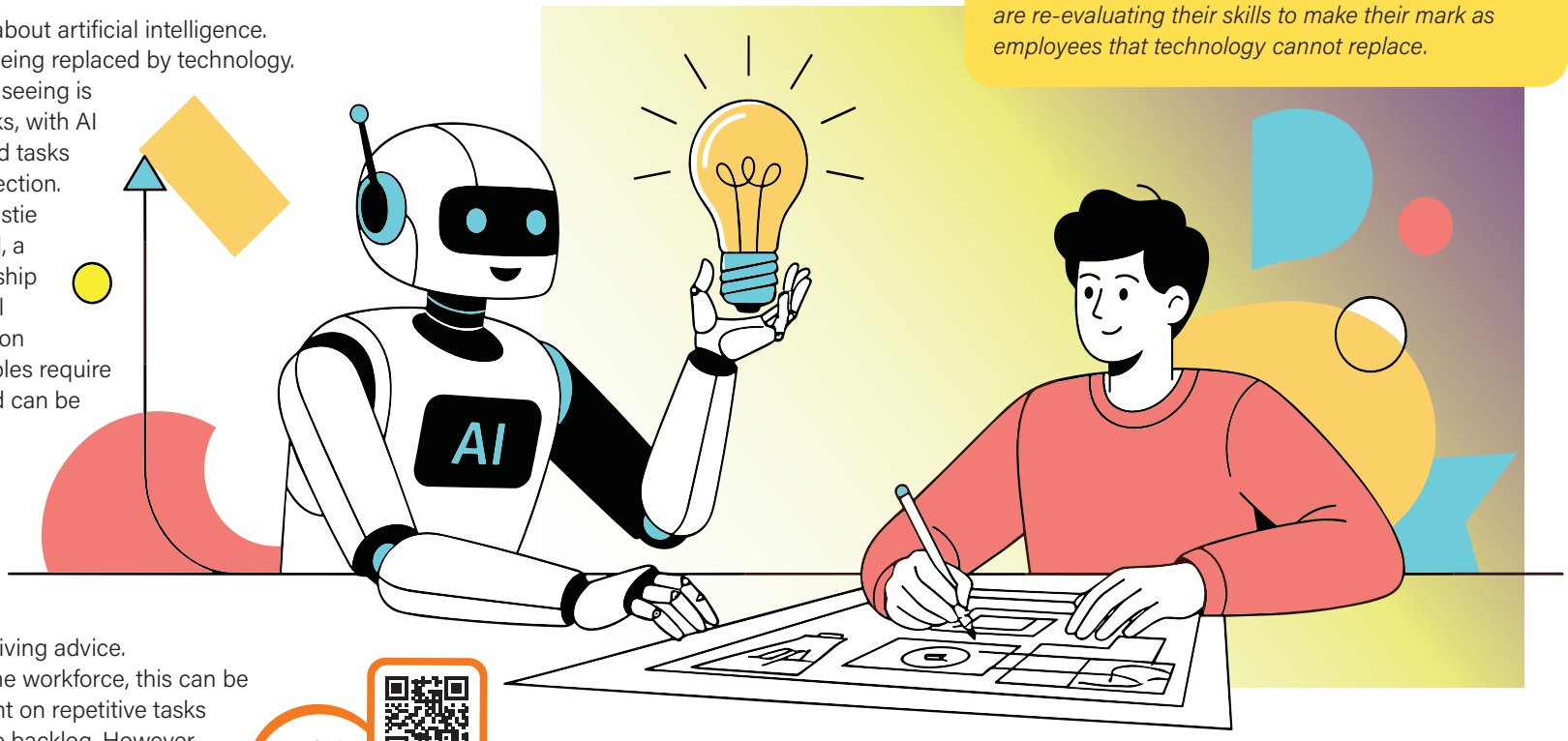
1. *Do you feel confident in your ability to come up with ideas, structure an assignment and proofread and refine?*
2. *When it comes to your studies, do you feel helpless without AI?*

AI and the 'human factor'

Students concerned about artificial intelligence in the workforce can focus on developing problem-solving skills and pursuing jobs focused on connection, writes ***Doris Wai***

BACKGROUND

It has only been a few years since the boom in generative AI. Still, many people already fear it could replace human workers, especially those in white-collar office jobs. Recent research from Stanford University suggests this change has been particularly hard on younger workers as companies turn to AI to take on tasks once performed by entry-level employees. New and experienced workers alike are re-evaluating their skills to make their mark as employees that technology cannot replace.



People used to be excited about artificial intelligence. Now, many worry about being replaced by technology. But in fact, what we might be seeing is the unbundling of routine tasks, with AI freeing us to focus on jobs and tasks that require real human connection.

Clinical psychologist Dr Kristie Craigen and Justine Campbell, a clinical counsellor and leadership coach, said many professional roles involve pattern recognition and data processing. These roles require minimal human judgment and can be outsourced to AI.

In the legal industry, for example, AI can now read contracts and spot standard clauses. This leaves junior lawyers to handle the parts AI cannot, such as negotiating with clients and giving advice.

For future generations of the workforce, this can be an upside, as less time is spent on repetitive tasks and on clearing administrative backlog. However, this shift away from traditional output reveals a deeper, more personal challenge regarding how we measure value.

"When a teenager's entire sense of worth is built on being the one who gets the right answer, and AI can do that faster, this becomes an identity crisis," Campbell said.

This crisis is a by-product of an educational system that prioritises completing tasks and following instructions while ignoring the human side of work.

The Hong Kong education system, in particular, produces brilliant exam takers. However, it does not teach students how to handle unpredictable situations or how to succeed without someone else telling them they did a good job.

"The education system spent 12 years training students to excel at exactly what's going to be automated: compliance, following instructions [and] producing correct answers efficiently. That's what AI does," Campbell said. "Capability, judgment [and] adaptation when there's no rubric? That's the human factor, and that's what we need to double down on."

Craigen stressed that AI should be treated as a co-pilot, not an autopilot. A co-pilot assists one in flying the plane, but they still make critical decisions, assess conditions and adjust course when something unexpected happens. Autopilot, on the other hand, removes one from the thinking process entirely.

Campbell, the founder of Craigen Evaluations, a Hong Kong clinic that offers psychological and psychoeducational testing services to students, added that most entry-level jobs include components that can be easily automated, while other functions will be tweaked due to the adoption of AI.

As such, the most resilient careers are those centred on human connection and presence.

Campbell shared an example from her own life: she once had a client who cried for 40 minutes during a counselling session. She said that the client did not say much; she just needed not to be alone with her feelings.

"My job as a therapist isn't to make people feel better," Campbell said. "My job is to help them feel what they're actually feeling – then provide support to navigate it and beyond. AI can't do that. It would soothe, offer solutions [and] make the discomfort go away."

For Hong Kong students undecided on a career path, fields such as elderly care, mental health services and neurodiversity support are worth exploring. These roles address critical gaps in existing systems – work that demands independent thinking, complex problem-solving and empathy.

These fields also have something in common: they require confidence when making judgment calls.

While this may seem like a simple concept, it can be difficult for teenagers to grasp in an age of information overload. To develop this skill, three habits are essential.

CURATE WHAT NOT TO KNOW

Knowing more information does not necessarily make one smarter. Often, it just drowns out a person's own voice. If someone is always consuming, they are not thinking.

One challenge is to spend one day a week without using AI or doing any online research. "Resist the urge to turn to AI for every answer. Sitting with your own thoughts builds the self-trust and clarity that endless information can drown out," Craigen said.

DO SOMETHING PHYSICAL

Activities such as cooking, indoor rock climbing and growing plants help one to connect with the real world. They also teach people to trust their experiences rather than just repeating what someone else told them.

BE OPEN TO OTHER PERSPECTIVES

Teenagers tend to disregard opposing views, and any challenge feels like an attack on who they are. However, staying open to different perspectives helps you identify your blind spots and leads to more informed, mature decision-making.

"This isn't about rejecting AI. It's about refusing to outsource the one thing it can never replicate ... knowing who you are," Campbell said.

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THINK ABOUT IT

1. *Why might people be nervous about AI and its potential impact on the job market?*
2. *As technology becomes more advanced, why is the "human factor" mentioned by Campbell so important?*