Efficiency at what cost? Salvaging constructive alignment from the GenAI hype

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Ease of use and access are leading educators to adopt generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) technologies to augment their practice in areas such as constructive alignment. Drawing on critical and post-digital literature to frame a critical discourse analysis, we interrogated grey literature on utilising GenAI in the constructive alignment process. We argue that while the current GenAI discourse promises efficiencies, the encroachment of automation into pedagogical design risks devaluing the educational process, undermining educator expertise and shifting constructive alignment towards an instrument of compliance. As such, educators must reclaim constructive alignment as a reflective, human-centred practice to safeguard pedagogical depth, improve design robustness and ensure that teaching remains a meaningful and enjoyable professional endeavour. Further, we contend that for GenAI to defensibly augment constructive alignment, it must transition from generic, Internet-trained assistance towards institutionally bounded systems configured around situated pedagogy, policy and institutional quality standards. By positioning GenAI as a reflective partner rather than an automated substitute, institutions can preserve educator agency and professional judgement. To support this shift, we also call for a repositioning of educational developer roles away from narratives of technology implementers back towards active collaborators in constructive alignment processes.

Implications for practice:

- Educators should critically engage with constructive alignment rather than automating it through GenAI to preserve pedagogical depth and meaning.
- Educators can strengthen learning design by using GenAI as a reflective prompt, not as a shortcut for efficiency.
- Educational developers need to assert their role as pedagogical collaborators rather than technology implementers.
- Policymakers and administrators should promote frameworks that value educator expertise and contextualised learning design over standardised automation.

Keywords: constructive alignment, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), higher education, critical discourse analysis (CDA), educational development

Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) technologies are increasingly used in higher education to augment learning and teaching activities (Bobula, 2024). While GenAI tools can bring affordances in

enhancing learning and teaching practice, making tasks more efficient (Zhuang et al., 2025), they also have the potential to misappropriate pedagogy when framed as techno-solutionist innovations (McInnes, 2026). With the increasing application of GenAI, educators are being prompted to use these technologies for constructive alignment (CA) tasks (Fang & Broussard, 2024; McCurry, 2024; Schaper, 2024); however, as yet, there is limited critical examination of what this technological partnership means for the pedagogical function of CA or the evolving role of educators and educational developers (EDs).

In this paper, we seek to answer three research questions: What advice is being given in online grey literature about using GenAI for CA? How are GenAI tools represented in relation to academic expertise and pedagogical practice in this advice? And how are GenAI tools represented in relation to educational developers? Employing critical discourse analysis (CDA; Fairclough, 1995), we interrogated how GenAI is entangled in discourses that subtly reframe CA and seek to understand how educators, EDs and GenAI are being centred in the CA process.

Literature

CA

CA emphasises that the design of a course enables learners to construct their understanding of the alignment between the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) and the teaching and learning activities with which they engage. Assessments are then used to measure how well the alignment is achieved (Biggs & Tang, 2011). The benefits of CA are well documented, including the potential to foster deeper learning (Wang et al., 2012) as well as systematic assurance that constructivism informs instructional design decisions at every stage of the process, placing students, not educators, at the centre of learning (Biggs, n.d.).

At the institutional level, CA provides a holistic view of how the range of skills developed in each course strengthens the graduate overall (Watts & Hodgson, 2015). As students encounter a programme of study, and not a single module (Jessop & Tomas, 2016), this ensures that the courses are differentiated enough to avoid redundancies and unnecessary repetition and ensure that learning gaps between courses cannot manifest (Kopera-Frye et al., 2008). In this way, the design of the ILOs needs to be highly contextual to the programme of study, requiring academic expertise and pedagogical practice, taking into consideration the range of stakeholders and their needs. For educators, CA processes increase collaboration and collegiality where systematic approaches provide a common language for discussing, analysing and modifying the curriculum (Uchiyama & Radin, 2009; Zelenitsky et al., 2014). Further, the collective, reflective curriculum approach necessitated by CA enhances pedagogical practices and results in higher-quality programmes and courses (Johnson & Johnson, 2013; Tariq et al., 2004; Voogt et al., 2016). These advantages of CA-based curricula collaboration create a compelling argument for curricula design to be more than an act of individualism.

While elements of CA, such as ILO and assessments, are often framed as best practices in curriculum design, they have also attracted criticism from two key perspectives: firstly, as performative instruments of compliance that prioritise educator auditability and student compliance over meaning, and secondly, as decontextualised artefacts that, due to the language needed to articulate them, risk undermining the situated expertise of educators (Erikson & Erikson, 2018; Panadero & Jonsson, 2020). Predominantly, these perspectives arise from structural critiques of the neoliberal higher education system that position the role of ILOs as objects of constraint within the changing expectations of a precarious, digitised, marketised and managerialised educational landscape (Morley, 2024). When viewed from these critical perspectives, mainstream guidance on the Internet regarding writing ILOs has been shown to favour measurability over meaning, often bypassing pedagogical reflection (Loughlin et al. 2021), and in many instances promoting an individualist approach.

Educational development

To help ensure that the pedagogical learnings of CA are realised and translated into higher-quality programmes and courses, many institutions draw on EDs (Heard-Lauréote & Kell, 2025). These third-space professionals navigate complex institutional environments that sit between agency and structure (Whitchurch & Healy, 2024). In line with the so-called "third wave" of identity scholarship, this positioning highlights the relationship between identity work and educational praxis (Barrow et al., 2022). Within these liminal spaces, EDs must negotiate and rationalise competing demands associated with CA (Sequeira, 2021). Consequently, the ways EDs enact and influence educational practice are shaped by institutional contexts, conceptions of professional identity and perceptions of agency within particular environments (Biggs & Tang, 2012; Conrad, 2012; Samuelowicz & Bain, 1992).

With the rise of GenAI in higher education, new structures that are reshaping the role of ED staff have emerged (McInnes, 2026). The institutional capacity development and professional learning provided by EDs are increasingly focused on GenAI technologies (Huijser et al., 2024; Nagy et al., 2023), with EDs supporting staff to navigate the emergent properties of rapidly changing systems and providing at-elbow support for effective technology adoption (White et al., 2020). Within the broader rise of GenAI use sits the increasing use of GenAI for CA (see, e.g., Schaper, 2024). With both CA and GenAI increasingly embedded in higher education, this study examined how their convergence reflects deeper shifts in educational practice.

Methodology

We employed CDA (Fairclough, 1995) to examine grey literature advice on using GenAI for CA and how these texts represent the role of GenAI in relation to academic expertise and ED practice. CDA is particularly suited to this study as it foregrounds the relationship between language, power and ideology in texts (Wodak & Meyer, 2009), enabling an interrogation of the broader sociocultural logics that shape educational narratives around GenAI. Ethics approval was not required for this study as it involved analysis of publicly available online content, with no interaction with human participants or collection of personal or sensitive data.

The discourse of GenAI in higher education curriculum design intersects with broader dynamics of techno-solutionism, automation and the shifting agency of educators in the face of GenAI tools (McInnes, 2026), raising questions about pedagogical values, professional expertise and educational equity. Grounded in a critical post-digital perspective (Fawns, 2019) on the entangled nature of technology, human agency, structure and pedagogy, this study drew on critical digital pedagogies (Stommel et al., 2020), which provided a lens to interrogate how CA, as an articulation of learning intent, is tied to educator reflexivity, digital technologies, student voice and the ethical and relational dimensions of teaching. It also enabled a critique of the risks posed by GenAI, particularly the reduction of CA to automated and procedurally generated outputs that reinforce systemic pressures aligned with hegemonic imperatives of standardisation, audit and control. These critical perspectives informed the analytic strategy and the interpretive stance of the study, offering a means to both problematise dominant narratives and articulate alternatives for CA design in the postdigital university.

Given the nature of CDA and the exploratory aims of this study, a purposive sampling approach was adopted. This type of sampling is consistent with CDA's emphasis on selecting texts that are information rich and likely to illuminate power, ideology and representation within a given discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The search strategy aimed to identify grey literature about GenAI. In April 2025, a search was conducted via Google using the following search terms: (“Generative AI” OR “Gen AI” OR “ChatGPT”) AND (“Constructive alignment” OR “Learning outcomes” OR “Learning objectives” OR “Assessment” OR “Rubric” OR “Learning activities”) AND (“Education” OR “Curriculum” OR “University”). The first 50 results were reviewed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria articulated in Table 1; 18 met the initial inclusion criteria and were detailed enough to be seen as providing detailed and actionable instructional advice on CA topics.

Table 1

Sampling inclusion and exclusion criteria for the search conducted in April 2025

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Focused on the use of GenAI tools in the constructive alignment process.	Posts focusing on GenAI tools for learning and teaching, unless the main purpose was a constructive alignment-related activity.
Publicly accessible, text-based grey literature.	Content behind paywalls or requiring a subscription to access.
Published in English between November 2022 and April 2025.	Languages other than English posted outside the inclusion dates.
A primary audience of higher education practitioners (e.g., educators, learning designers, educational technologists).	An audience of technical developers or general readers, and/or posts that demonstrate the technical function of AI tools without offering advice or narratives about educational use.

Following the search strategy, the text selection process aimed for theoretical saturation (Rahimi, 2024). Theoretical saturation was reached after the analysis of 14 sources – see Table 2. In the final three entries, no substantially new themes or discursive framings emerged; rather, coded patterns continued to recur without the emergence of new linguistic or ideological categories, which indicated that the data set provided sufficient discursive breadth to support a robust CDA. The data set included posts from varied platforms, authors and tones, ensuring sufficient discursive breadth for analysis.

Table 2
List of sources used for the CDA with contextual information

Title	Author	Date	CA topic	Genre
1. Generative AI for Course Design: Crafting Learning Objectives	McCurry (The University of Michigan)	2024, February 5	Learning outcomes	Institutional web page
2. Using AI to Draft Learning Outcomes	National Louis University	No date	Learning outcomes	Institutional web page
3. Creating Course Learning Objectives (In *AI Cookbook: Recipes and More from the University of Missouri*)	University of Missouri & University of Florida	2024, August 19	Learning outcomes	Open-access book chapter
4. Using AI to Assist with Course Design	North Carolina State University	No date	Course design	Institutional web page
5. Prompt Engineering for Educators – Making Generative AI Work for You	Lui (The University of Sydney)	2023, April 27	Course design	Institutional web page
6. Prompting Learning Outcomes	Centre for Innovation and Excellence in Learning (Vancouver Island University)	No date	Learning outcomes	Institutional web page
7. ChatGPT and Generative AI: 25 Applications in Teaching and Assessment	Dianati & Laudari (*Times Higher Education*)	2023, August 15	Learning objectives and assessment	Blog post

Title	Author	Date	CA topic	Genre
8. Co-creating Assessment Rubrics with Students and ChatGPT in Film and TV	McAreavey (University College Dublin)	No date	Rubrics	Open-access book chapter
9. Ethical Use of Gen-AI for Designing Rubrics at UNSW: Nexus Fellows' Perspectives	Lucas, Jones, Campbell & Pacitti (The University of New South Wales)	2024, June 5	Rubrics	Institutional web page
10. Creating Effective Rubrics Using Chat-GPT: A Faculty Guide	Office of Teaching & Learning (The University of Denver)	No date	Rubrics	Institutional web page
11. How to Use Copilot and ChatGPT to Create Rubrics	Eskew (Northwestern University)	2025, January	Rubrics	Institutional web page
12. Design your course with ChatGPT or MS Copilot in 5 Steps	Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam	2025, March 3	Course design	Institutional web page
13. ChatGPT Prompts for Course Design	Matsueda (Pennsylvania State University)	2024, September 15	Course design	Institutional web page
14. Augmented Course Design: Using AI to Boost Efficiency and Expand Capacity	Fang & Broussard (*Educause Review*)	2024, August 7	Course design	Blog post

While applications of CDA typically involve close reading of individual texts, this study adopted a hybrid approach combining thematic analysis with CDA, which allowed systematic identification of recurring patterns across the entire data set via theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) before applying the granular, critical lenses of CDA to those identified themes.

Firstly, recurring discursive patterns were identified through a theoretical thematic analysis, which looked at linguistic patterns and conceptual clusters across the data set, allowing the development of key thematic categories. The theoretical thematic analysis was conducted using a combination of deductive codes derived from literature on neoliberalism and CA (e.g., "efficiency", "standardisation", "compliance") and inductive codes that emerged during the close reading of the texts (e.g., "technological anthropomorphism", "delegation of agency"). To ensure interpretative credibility and rigour, we engaged in regular reflexive peer-debriefing sessions to review code definitions and refine theme boundaries.

Secondly, the texts were analysed through the lens of Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of discourse to explore how language both reflects and reinforces broader institutional and ideological conditions. This involved moving recursively between the micro level (textual analysis – textual features like vocabulary, grammar, transitivity, modality, metaphors), the meso level (discursive practice – how these texts are produced, distributed and consumed within university hierarchies) and the macro level (social practice – the broader ideology, power structures and institutional logics). This process supported a deeper interrogation of how language, genre and ideology interacted across the sample in constructing the role of GenAI within CA discourse.

Discursive practice

The meso-level analysis focused on how the sample texts were produced and intended to be consumed by individuals and universities. The final data set of 14 sources was logged with metadata, including title,

author, publication platform, date and a summary of relevance. The background of the text was examined to gather contextual information; notably, four focused only on learning outcomes, four on assessments and rubrics, and the remaining six on a combination of CA-related course design processes. Five of the texts were from institutional web pages of universities ranked in the top 100 in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2025: three North American (Eskew, 2025; Matsueda, 2025; McCurry, 2024) and two Australian (Lui, 2023; Lucas et al., 2024). Three from institutional web pages of universities ranked outside the top 100 in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2025: two North American (North Carolina State University, n.d.; Office of Teaching and Learning, 2023) and one European (Vrije Universiteit, 2025). Two were from institutional web pages of unranked North American universities (Centre for Innovation and Excellence in Learning, n.d.; National Louis University, n.d.). Two open-access chapters by authors from universities ranked outside the top 100 in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2025: one North American (University of Missouri, 2024) and one European (McAreavey, 2025); and two from educational blogs: one North American (Fang & Broussard, 2024) and one European (Dianati & Laudari, 2023).
Despite variation in institutional status and global region, the majority of texts were authored by centrally positioned third-space staff, educational specialists or university learning and teaching units. This reflects a growing discursive role played by EDs in shaping and disseminating curriculum design advice, particularly in the context of emerging GenAI technologies. The dominance of institutional web pages and official university communication channels suggests a discourse produced under conditions of reputational and managerial accountability, even when published in informal genres such as blogs or guidance posts. The presence of two open-access chapters indicates an attempt to formalise this discourse within the academic publishing space, lending it academic legitimacy while retaining its applied, instructional character.

Across the data set, texts shared a common discursive orientation in that they adopted the language of instructional advice and procedural guidance, often blending academic, technological and managerial discourses without clear demarcation. This interdiscursivity positioned the texts not as sites of contestation or exploration, but as solutions-focused interventions, reflecting the identity of their authors and the institutional pressures under which they operate. Such discursive practices shaped how GenAI and CA were framed, not as pedagogical concepts to be critically interrogated, but as tools and techniques to be operationalised within existing institutional logics.

Textual analysis

The micro-level linguistic analysis focused on specific features of the vocabulary, grammar, syntax and semantics of the texts. Overall, the texts utilised an authoritative, declarative voice that was consistently used when presenting the role of GenAI in CA. This is reinforced by the reputation of authors and their institutions, suggesting a formalisation of the practice within education. Within this voice, pedagogical terminology beyond that referring to CA was broadly absent, with the rationale behind the use of GenAI replaced with repeated efficiency-related and techno-solutionist terms that described GenAI as “an effective and efficient way to draft rubrics" (Eskew, 2025, p. 1), able to "streamline the process of developing robust rubrics that provide a solid framework for assessing student work" (Office of Teaching and Learning, 2023) and "make course design more efficient, aligned and engaging” (North Carolina State University, n.d.).

Passive constructions that obscured agency were used, for example, "chat prompt(s) are how you program the AI to do things for you" (Lui, 2023). These superficially seem to empower the user, but instead reduce CA to a procedural efficiency-based activity, prioritising task automation over co-construction or critical engagement. This was reinforced by many of the sources, which utilised visual or structural features such as numbered steps or templates, which suggest standardisation and universality, further framing CA as a productisation of education.

Across the texts, there were linguistic cues suggesting a hierarchy in which academic staff were positioned as "needed to provide subject matter expertise", but require GenAI support to "help with some of the heavy lifting of developing learning objectives, organising course content, creating course outlines, and

aligning course components" (North Carolina State University, n.d.) – although, for the most part, this was implied through lexical choices rather than stated quite so outright. This created a discursive partition: by cordoning off subject matter expertise as the only human contribution while framing the actual pedagogical construction as heavy lifting, the texts devalue the cognitive labour of curriculum design. The use of a physical, industrial metaphor reduces intellectual and pedagogical decision-making to a series of manual, repetitive tasks, suggesting that the expert is merely a supervisor to a more efficient automated labourer.

The language across the sources often anthropomorphised the GenAI, portraying it as an "educational expert and assistant" or "sparring partner" (Vrije Universiteit, 2025) and as "intelligent assistants in instructional design" (Fang & Broussard, 2024, para. 1), further compounded by imagery depicting robots and AI-generated scenes. By using language in this way, the texts shift the genre from one of professional guidance, where an expert directs a tool, to a collaborative dialogue with a machine. This effectively elevates the tool to the status of a pedagogical peer, creating a "discursive partnership", where the GenAI is granted a seat at the design table. This move is significant because it subtly suggests that the GenAI possesses the same level of contextual and ethical discernment as the educator. Consequently, the act of curriculum design is reframed; it is no longer a solitary, reflective practice of professional judgement, but a socialised interaction with an algorithmic "colleague". Further, the portrayal of expert anthropomorphised technology alongside supporting images served to reinforce a technocratic perspective on the content of the sources, bounding the content within a framing of technological innovation rather than education. This represented the overall textual choices across the sources, reflecting a broader discursive pattern in which professional judgement was delegitimised or displaced by technological delegation.

Social practice analysis

The macro-level analysis focused on the broader social themes and ideologies that the sample texts reinforced. As the sample of source posts exhibited a high degree of interdiscursivity, where multiple discourses coexisted within single texts, we inductively grouped themes under the logic of AI hype and institutional pressures, linked to the theoretical underpinnings of this study (Fawns, 2019; Stommel et al., 2020), to aid in surfacing how discursive formations were shaped by ideological causal mechanisms and institutional structures.

AI hype

Predominantly, a technocratic discourse foregrounding innovation, disruption and efficiency was woven through the language used to describe GenAI. Unsurprisingly, this was rooted in techno-solutionist notions of GenAI in education (McInnes, 2026) and represented a broader logic whereby GenAI use is framed as an inevitable market-driven outcome – "GenAI is here to stay! An "if you can't beat them, join them" attitude is the key to unlocking and embracing the opportunities and benefits to educators" (Lucas et al., 2024). These representations spoke more to a technology-driven, AI hype-based discourse that viewed newness as value and an ideological belief that automation is equal to progress, compounded by a deference to GenAI authority that represented it as a more competent and objective author of CA than human teaching assistants – "Instructors often work with subject-matter and content knowledge, which can be so expansive and complex that they have blind spots in the course planning process, or a lack of understanding of student or curriculum needs" (Fang & Broussard, 2024, para. 4).

In these discourses, notions of CA were expressed as being able to be delegated pedagogical decisions whereby educator expertise could be procedurally automated – "AI can generate clear, measurable learning objectives aligned with Bloom's Taxonomy, ensuring that they target appropriate cognitive skills and provide a strong foundation for assessments and instructional activities" (North Carolina State University, n.d.). This resulted in an approach to CA that prioritises aesthetic precision over pedagogical depth and true alignment – "Before you start using Chat-GPT, ensure you have a well-defined assignment prompt ... Consider the following aspects … task description … criteria … achievement levels" (Office of Teaching and Learning, 2023). This technology-driven discourse also led to the promotion of epistemic narrowing within educational practices, where universalised claims about best practice ignored the

sociocultural dimensions of knowledge in an educational context – "When given the right context, (genAI) can generate tailored, specific and measurable learning outcomes that align with course goals. AI tools can suggest outcomes and adjust the difficulty level of objectives, ensuring they are challenging yet attainable" (National Louis University, n.d.).

Institutional pressures

Alternative discourses often drew on corporate or managerialist ideologies (Morley, 2024), framing CA as an output aligned to taxonomies and standards rather than pedagogical commitments grounded in context. This managerialist framing situated CA as a performative act rather than a pedagogical one, where the main goal of using GenAI was to complete the task rather than engage in it with any real depth: "If any of the suggestions are unclear, ask Chat-GPT to elaborate or clarify. This will help ensure that you have a deep understanding of the suggested criteria and levels" (Office of Teaching and Learning, 2023). Within this framing, some sources positioned the use of GenAI as an efficiency-based logic, situating it within a neoliberal ideology of education, where CA is treated as something to be streamlined – "One of the ethical uses for Gen-AI is the focus of this post - to showcase the design of rubrics using Gen-AI, which was previously a time-consuming exercise for educators" (Lucas et al., 2024, para. 2) – while at the same time diminishing academic labour, the invisible or affective labour of educators, treating curriculum work as input-output production, not as relational or ethical labour – "Faculty have shared how these tools transform a traditionally laborious task into a more creative and engaging process" (Eskew, 2025, p. 3).

Statements such as “You plan to use ChatGPT to generate some ideas on potential learning objectives to get you started and guide your curriculum creation" (McCurry, 2024) positioned CA as a procedural task to be optimised, rather than reflecting a genuine pedagogical approach to CA. This led to an overall decontextualisation of CA, where it did not account for nuances in disciplinary, student or local contexts; instead, it sought to minimise the role of the educator’s perspective, intent or critical reflection – “If you disagree with the outputs [of the AI], you can reply with 'More?' to get additional ideas" (Centre for Innovation and Excellence in Learning, n.d.).

While using educational language to speak to pedagogy, such references were typically surface level, operating within a broader narrative that prioritised alignment and standardisation. These educational absences lacked discussion around pedagogy, student-centric practice or learner diversity, which in turn promoted a surface-level application of CA – [at end of example prompts] "When review [sic] learning outcome, ask yourself three questions. By the end of the course, what should students know? What should students be able to do? What qualities or attributes do you want students to have?" (Centre for Innovation and Excellence in Learning, n.d.). Alongside this pedagogical thinking, EDs received an explicit technicist framing of EDs as supporting technology implementation – "Instructional designers can either play the role of faculty developer in helping faculty acquire fluency or work with dedicated faculty developers in developing faculty capability in this area" (Fang & Broussard, 2024, para. 21). The use of terms such as helping acquire fluency is a critical linguistic marker that repositions the ED as a technical trainer rather than a pedagogical collaborator. This discourse effectively shuts the EDs out of the educational loop, transforming their identity into a mediating mechanism for software adoption rather than a partner in deep curriculum design.

Overall, the discursive interplay between AI hype and institutional structures revealed an underlying ideological struggle between CA as relational, context-dependent commitments to student learning and CA as an administrative artefact suited to automation and the role of innovation to resolve this. This tension reinforced concerns about the erosion of educator agency and the reframing of curriculum design as a technical rather than a pedagogical practice.

The problem with the portrayal of CA in the GenAI context

The final CDA stage brought together the textual, discursive and social analyses to interpret how key themes from the grey literature discourse construct GenAI’s role in developing CA.

Performativity

The first concern from this sample is the misappropriation of CA for performative purposes. This is brought about by the dual narratives from the sources about positive time efficiencies and either deferring to GenAI's authority or omitting educational considerations altogether, both of which decentre academic expertise. Performativity narratives, on the whole, frame CA as a technical artefact rather than a reflective, iterative educational process. By emphasising rapid, authoritative outputs and offering copy-and-paste prompts, the advice often privileged surface-level correctness and aesthetic polish over pedagogical intentionality, prioritising form and formatting at the expense of context and purpose.

A performative approach risks producing CA that merely looks aligned, resulting in CA outputs that, though technically coherent, remain generic and pedagogically thin. The irony is that this superficiality will make it far more difficult for students to experience the interconnectedness between topics (Trigwell & Prosser, 1991), enervating CA's central purpose of facilitating students' capacity to construct meaningful learning. Ultimately, this approach converges with managerial rhetoric, which reframes CA as a bureaucratic exercise – an instrument of accountability rather than a pedagogical tool (Loughlin et al., 2021). By aligning GenAI use with these managerial appropriations, CA is rendered an artefact of automation, sidelining academic judgement and undermining effective, CA-driven pedagogy (Erikson & Erikson, 2018; Souto-Otero, 2012).
Nested within a performative approach was a technicist, managerial lens on the role of EDs, one that exploits neoliberal tensions in the role, which devalues their traditionally relational and values-first approach (Heard-Lauréote & Kell, 2025). The sources position EDs not as educational specialists but rather functionally as a mediating mechanism supporting technology implementation. Validated by the reputable nature of the institutions disseminating public advice, this material power structure aids in shaping and forming the role and identity of EDs and how they will be perceived by faculty in relation to their knowledge of CA.

Situated pedagogies

Secondly, there was a tendency across the sources to omit meaningful references to the specific sociocultural, disciplinary or institutional contexts of students and educators. While some prompts gestured towards contextualisation, GenAI still operates at a generalist level, presenting AI-generated CA as pedagogically neutral or unproblematic. Yet, GenAI content lacks the lived understanding of student diversity, institutional culture, local curriculum pressures and the nuances of disciplinary epistemologies and ontologies. In sources that bolster this with claims about GenAI's access to a "vast array of educational content and pedagogical methods" (McCurry, 2024), the effect is to further erode the role of educator expertise, masking the inherently interpretive and situated nature of CA.

This lack of contextualisation is compounded by a widespread omission of educator reflexivity or collaboration, which risks displacing educator agency in favour of automated convenience. CA is not merely a procedural task; it is a moment of reflection where educators articulate their intentions together, grapple with values, and engage relationally with student learning. Automating the CA process with GenAI in the ways described in the sources reduces the reflective dimension of curriculum design to a mechanical interaction, stifling potential opportunities for deep pedagogical insight. Moreover, it encourages a false sense of precision, with AI-generated outputs appearing clear and measurable, while masking the inherently tacit, contextual and relational nature of educational practice (Erikson & Erikson, 2018).

Shallow CA

The third issue observed in the sources stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of CA as perpetuated by various educational sources. Sources often presented a superficial interpretation of CA, emphasising its alignment elements while neglecting the critical role of the constructive (Moss & Rathnappulige, 2025). This oversimplification is further compounded by the promotion of GenAI as a tool to independently create the components of the CA process. When elements such as ILOs, teaching activities and assessments are outsourced to AI and generated in isolation, they risk being treated as discrete rather

than interdependent and entangled. As a result, the coherence of the learning design is compromised, and educators may be left uncertain about whether meaningful alignment has actually been achieved (Hadjianastasis, 2017). Compounding the surface-level application of CA is the narrative shift in the role of EDs described previously. EDs normally work in close partnership with peers as experts supporting teaching and learning (Heard-Lauréote & Kell, 2025), yet the templated approaches to CA advocated for in the sources shut EDs out of a closed loop system between the educators and GenAI. Therefore, any role these staff play in operationally ensuring CA is now sidelined.

Salvaging CA from the GenAI hype

To address the concerns identified in the preceding analysis, two steps are required: first, a focus on correcting advice around CA, and second, a focus on the GenAI technologies used to augment it.

Recalibrating CA

The grey literature discourse positions GenAI as a starting point for CA, when CA itself must be the starting point. The issue is not whether technology can play a role in the CA process; it is whether educators engaging with that technology possess a sufficiently developed understanding of CA to direct, evaluate and, where necessary, reject what the technology produces. CA is grounded in constructivist epistemology: it positions understanding as actively constructed through engagement with the interdependencies between outcomes, teaching sequences and assessments, rather than received through procedural compliance with a framework (Biggs, 1996). Research on deep and surface approaches to learning has established that the quality of understanding produced depends on the quality of engagement that precedes it (Marton & Saljo, 1976): an educator who engages with CA at surface level, or who delegates the alignment process to GenAI before developing sufficient understanding to evaluate what is produced, risks accepting outputs that appear plausible but lack the contextual grounding that genuine alignment requires. Before any augmentative use of GenAI in the CA process can be educationally defensible, educators must already understand what CA requires, how its elements are interdependent and what it means to construct that coherence deliberately.

The same evaluative challenge that educators routinely caution students against applies here. A student who lacks the conceptual framework to evaluate a source may accept output that appears plausible but is analytically unsound. An educator who does not yet possess sufficient understanding of CA to assess GenAI output critically is in precisely the same position: without that schema, surface acceptance is the likely result, reinforcing procedural compliance rather than genuine alignment. Biggs and Tang (2011) as well as Loughlin et al. (2021) have emphasised the importance of reflective engagement with CA, yet they have not adequately addressed what happens when that reflective capacity has not been developed. Where it is absent, GenAI output is likely to be accepted on the basis of plausibility rather than pedagogical soundness. The degree of risk scales with the educator's familiarity with CA. An experienced educator with a well-developed understanding of the framework may recognise intuitively when GenAI output is misaligned or pedagogically unsound and can interrogate and redirect it accordingly. For the novice educator, that evaluative capacity is still developing, making uncritical acceptance considerably more likely. In both cases, however, the risk of surface engagement remains: even where output is recognised as plausible, accepting it without the iterative interrogation CA demands substitutes procedural compliance for genuine alignment.

GenAI can also suggest assessment tasks and map them broadly to ILOs, but it cannot know the depth, level and interconnectedness of the topics within a course, or broader degree, nor how much learning each requires before meaningful assessment is possible. An educator engaging deeply with CA develops that contextual knowledge through the process of mapping outcomes to teaching sequences and examining what each stage of the sequence demands of learners. It is this mapping activity that reveals at what point in the learning journey students will have developed sufficient understanding to demonstrate the outcomes being assessed, and what form that assessment should take. This makes assessment design robust.

Finally, the consequences for feedback are significant. Feedback is most effective when it helps learners understand not only what mistakes they made but why they made them and what they need to do differently (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Wisniewski et al., 2020). An educator whose assessment design has emerged from careful mapping of the learning sequence is better positioned to provide that kind of precise, forward-looking feedback. They are more likely to recognise where in the progression of learning a student has encountered difficulty and what the next steps towards resolution look like. Where assessment timing and composition have been generated without that contextual grounding, feedback risks remaining general rather than diagnostically precise. The preceding argument does not preclude GenAI from playing a role in the CA process. It establishes the condition under which that role becomes educationally defensible: the educator must already possess sufficient understanding of CA to direct, evaluate and, where necessary, reject what the technology produces.

Using GenAI in the CA process

If GenAI is to be used to augment CA, we argue that its most defensible form is not through general-purpose large language models (i.e., generic, Internet-trained GenAI tools such as ChatGPT) guided by practices advocated in grey literature. Rather, a possible direction is to create a knowledge-grounded retrieval-augmented generation agent, a bounded system configured around institutional knowledge, policy, pedagogical standards and guided by a specific configuration (Barnard, 2026). By deploying GenAI in this way, institutions can use the technology in a way that augments CA, provoking educators and EDs to reflect more deeply and innovatively, rather than becoming a substitute for pedagogical expertise and agency.

The knowledge base for the agent

When implementing a GenAI agent to support CA, the issue is not simply technical performance; it is epistemic authority. When CA guidance is derived from a general corpus, the system implicitly privileges diffuse, decontextualised norms over local curriculum frameworks, accreditation requirements and established educational development practice. In contrast, an institutionally configured agent re-centres legitimate expertise within the organisation. Such a system would be trained or configured on an institutional knowledge base made up of curriculum policy, assessment rubrics, graduate attribute frameworks, examples of strong alignment and discipline-specific conventions. The outputs would therefore be anchored in recognised standards rather than generic formulations. This repositions a teaching and learning unit as the curator of the knowledge base and the setter of the rules within which the system operates.

Within this knowledge base, GenAI functions in an augmentative capacity, providing rapid contextualised formative feedback on CA. It can interrogate assessment tasks for coherence with stated outcomes, flagging potential under- or over-assessment and generate alternative phrasings or suggest variations that educators then evaluate. In each case, the system provides high-quality CA outputs within institutional norms, policy and practice.

The configuration of the agent

A defensible agentic model for CA is therefore not one that generates finished curriculum artefacts on demand, but one that operationalises disciplined pedagogical critique. Its configuration deliberately mirrors the stance of an ED in a central teaching and learning unit. It guides educators' thinking without supplying answers, poses probing questions, identifies misalignment declaratively and explains pedagogical implications. It is designed to prevent silent delegation. In this configuration, GenAI does not provide authoritative solutions or CA artefacts; it supports educators' reasoning process by surfacing misalignments, articulating implications, and generating alternatives for evaluation. This embeds augmentation rather than substitution at the level of system design.

The agent's authority is derivative and bounded: it operates within standards defined and maintained by the institution's teaching and learning unit, escalating to human expertise when boundary conditions are triggered, for example, where accreditation or cross-programme coherence issues arise or where novel

pedagogical models exceed encoded exemplars. Escalation is not an exception but a feature: it ensures that high-impact, contextually nuanced work remains a site of collaborative professional judgement rather than automated output. Institutionally bounded deployment also clarifies data governance: prompts and outputs are retained internally, the knowledge base remains an institutional asset rather than an input to commercial systems, and staff have a governed environment within which to experiment with the technology's capabilities.

GenAI as a liminal tutor

A second, more modest augmentative function deserves separate attention. The relationship between an educator and an ED is inherently episodic: consultations are scheduled, time is constrained, and the iterative work of refining alignment continues in the gaps between formal conversations. In these liminal moments, a suitably configured conversational tool can serve a genuinely constructive purpose, not by supplying answers, but by helping educators articulate their thinking, surface assumptions they have not yet examined and arrive at their next consultation better prepared. Used in this way, GenAI functions less as an advisor and more as a provisional sounding board that extends the productive reach of the ED relationship without displacing it. Rather than closing the loop between educators and technology, it keeps the loop open, oriented towards the next human conversation rather than away from it.

The critical condition, again, is sequence. This function is only educationally productive when the educator already possesses sufficient understanding of CA to direct the conversation, interrogate the responses and resist accepting outputs uncritically. For the novice educator, this means the liminal tutor function follows, rather than precedes, meaningful engagement with an ED. Without that grounding, the conversational tool risks replicating the very dynamic the bounded agent is designed to prevent, silent delegation dressed as reflection.

The institutional implications of failing to maintain that condition extend beyond individual course quality. Where GenAI is positioned as the primary rather than supplementary source of CA support, EDs risk being reframed as technical configurers of that system rather than as the pedagogical experts whose knowledge and values the system is designed to operationalise. The quality of CA support an institution can provide depends not only on the configuration of its tools but on the pedagogical authority and professional judgement of educators who shape how those tools are used. EDs bring values-led, educationally grounded perspectives to teaching and learning that a configured system can reflect but cannot generate (Heard-Lauréote & Kell, 2025). Ensuring that GenAI augments rather than displaces that expertise is therefore not only a matter of professional identity but of institutional educational quality. The nature and scale of these risks to ED roles and identities warrant further investigation, particularly given the documented effects of identity disruption on staff retention in higher education (Bolden et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Our CDA analysis has demonstrated that the current advice in the sampled online grey literature about using GenAI for CA is flawed. The prevailing discourse points to misunderstandings of CA that present it as standardisable, performative, unsituated and superficial while lauding the expertise and efficiency of the technology above that of academic expertise, while unintentionally repositioning EDs as technical advisors supporting the implementation of GenAI technologies. In effect, it treats the use of GenAI as a means for automating procedural compliance with the goal of efficiency. When CA is treated as a promptable workflow, we lose out on the substantive engagement through which a working understanding of the framework develops, the iterative interrogation of outcomes, sequences and assessment coherence that equips educators to evaluate whether any output, human or generated, genuinely serves the learning it claims to support.

GenAI use for CA, we contend, should remain within the augmentative domain. Institutions should therefore make explicit decisions about the level of GenAI capability they are willing to authorise in curriculum processes and ensure that governance structures reflect those limits. The practical implication is that GenAI in CA should be purpose-built, bounded and accountable. It should expand educators'

capacity and agency to interrogate and strengthen their designs, not substitute for pedagogical reasoning and divestment of responsibility. It should be anchored in educational best practices, institutional standards and policy rather than generic internet discourse. It should be an enabler and scaler of ED practice, allowing teaching and learning units to maximise the support they provide. It should operate within clearly defined organisational boundaries that preserve educator agency, protect data and maintain the authority of educational development expertise.

This paper contributes a diagnostic lens for educational technology research by identifying the specific discursive categories that currently characterise the GenAI hype. These categories provide a conceptual lens for interrogating how institutional guidance may prioritise procedural efficiency over pedagogical depth. Future research should move beyond these surface narratives to investigate the sociomaterial production of such guidance and its longitudinal impact on the professional identities and agency of EDs. Ultimately, this critical framing serves as a foundation for reclaiming CA as a deeply human, reflective and situated practice.

Author contributions

Richard McInnes: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing; **Laura Airey**: Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing; **Paul Moss:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing; **Sasikala Rathnappulige:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing.

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