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# If exams stay, don't fear ChatGPT

Reza Schwitzer

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**A**t last weekend's conference of the Association of School and College Leaders, Dr Jo Saxton, exams chief regulator, said that ChatGPT has made traditional examined conditions "more important than ever". In this piece I set out in more detail why she's right.

I'm old enough, or indeed young enough, to remember the early days of SparkNotes. Founded in 1999, it quickly became the scourge of classrooms across the country. "Why would kids read a book anymore?" people would ask. "SparkNotes means education will never be the same again."

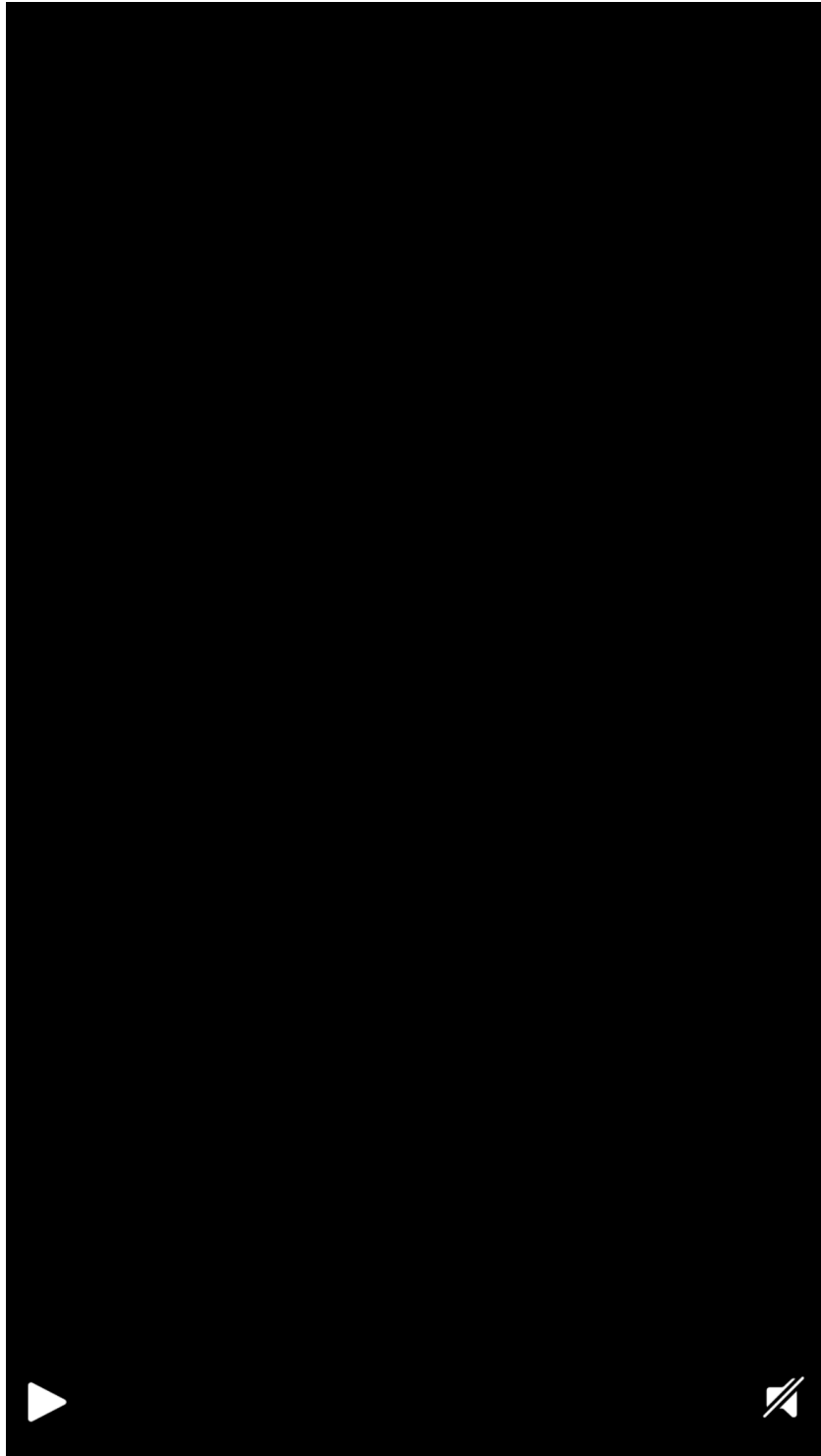
The same was also true of Wikipedia. The harbingers of doom told us that it would undermine learning, that young people would not truly know anything anymore, that their education would simply become a copy/paste exercise.

Some might argue they were right. Copying and pasting from internet research has become a staple part of any study and, frankly, daily working life too. Maybe education really has never been the same since?

But I don't buy it. Yes, we all use copy and paste in our lives. When young people are studying, of course they will take evidence from the internet and use it in their essays. But what was predicted, and hasn't happened, is a large scale absence of knowledge. By that I mean we don't have a generation of young people coming through who have great copy/paste skills but don't actually know anything. If anything, employers regularly complain that the knowledge is there, it's the day-to-day soft skills that aren't. The predicted doom has totally failed to materialise. In which case, the question becomes "why not?"

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“Show me the incentive and I’ll show you the outcome” is the brilliant quote from Charlie Munger, a billionaire investor, and it applies here. Young people care about their GCSEs, and they care about their grades. That drives certain behaviours.

Polling by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) in 2021 of 1,001

young people in England showed that 73 per cent were glad they took their GCSEs and 66 per cent felt pride in them. This is a cohort of students who want to do well.

And guess what? Doing well in externally marked, invigilated exams means not taking shortcuts during your studies like copying your work from Wikipedia, or from the person sitting next to you on the bus, because you'll get found out.

Every young person knows that if they spend their time relying on SparkNotes or Wikipedia, when the moment comes to sit their exams they will be completely stuffed. Most pupils will sit mock exams well before their GCSEs, which serve as a timely reminder of that fact.

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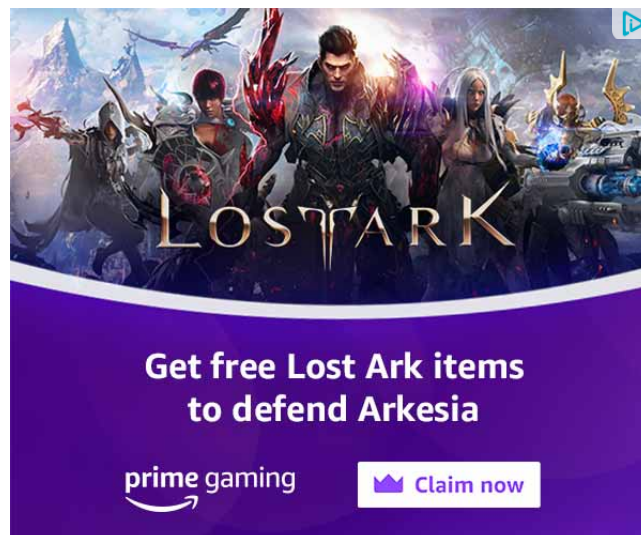
So where does that leave us in 2023 as we consider what to do with ChatGPT? I say the key thing is to keep exams which are externally marked, or internally marked with external moderation, and done under exam conditions. That doesn't mean you can't ever have open book exams – far from it. It just means someone is checking what's in that open book.

Because there's no doubt in my mind that learning to use ChatGPT and other AI tools will be important for research and working life in future to at least some extent, in the same way that being able to navigate Wikipedia and other websites is helpful now.

But there's also no doubt in my mind that we still want to know whether young people have learnt what matters - that they have the right conceptual framework in place to learn new skills or go on to acquire more knowledge in a range of different subjects. And that will remain the case as long as we use exams for at least part of our assessment arsenal.

Of course, it won't be this simple and, together with the regulator and other exam boards, we will work to further understand the implications of developments in AI for non-examined content such as coursework or project-based qualifications. We will also continue to develop ways for both human examiners and computer programmes to spot where AI has been used.

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But fundamentally, retaining externally marked exams as a core part of our assessment toolkit is the main way we can mitigate the problems associated with ChatGPT.

*Reza Schwitzer is head of external affairs at AQA*

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