

6 AI Anxieties

Rapid Analysis, by Annabel Blake, Marcus Carter, Eduardo Velloso, + 20 Australian teenagers

In Brief

Twenty Australian teenagers told us what they fear about AI. Their anxieties aren't just about their own use. Beyond the classroom, they worry about how adults build, sell and police this technology. This paper is for the policymakers, educators and program designers shaping teens' AI future, and the guardians living it with them. Read on to learn more about the 6 anxieties teens shared that were...

Amplified by their social feeds:

- *Untrustworthy leaders*; they distrust the people behind the product & some teens boycott entirely.
- *Environmental harm*; they worry about AI's water and energy use, fuelled by alarmist social posts
- *Shrinking career market*; an anticipatory fear that "AI takes jobs," before they've even started work

Felt firsthand in the classroom:

- *AI as a threat to thought*; they worry that using AI will 'damage' their brain. Opportunities to expand AI literacy programs to include education on the cognitive and environmental effects of AI.
- *AI as the creativity destroyer*: school policies readily offload *creative* ideation to AI, and police *execution* as something students should do themselves. This leaves students feeling like their unique, creative ideas don't matter and impacts motivation. Highlights a need to review school policies and the gap between DoE guidance and implementation.
- *AI as a restricted technology*: teens describe harsh, unclear rules that breed confusion, fear and evasion. Students often turn to AI out of a real need, but feel worried they'll be punished for improper use. Opportunities to develop clearer guidance and design other solutions for students feeling overwhelmed, behind or disengaged.

1. Introduction

Navigating mixed emotions

Do teenagers love or hate AI? The answer is yes, both, often all at once. Yay! Argh! Urgh? They straddle multiple emotions and worlds; one foot in the classroom, one in the wider grown-up world. They absorb anxieties from the adults and media around them, *as well* as those stemming from their first-hand use of AI as young people.

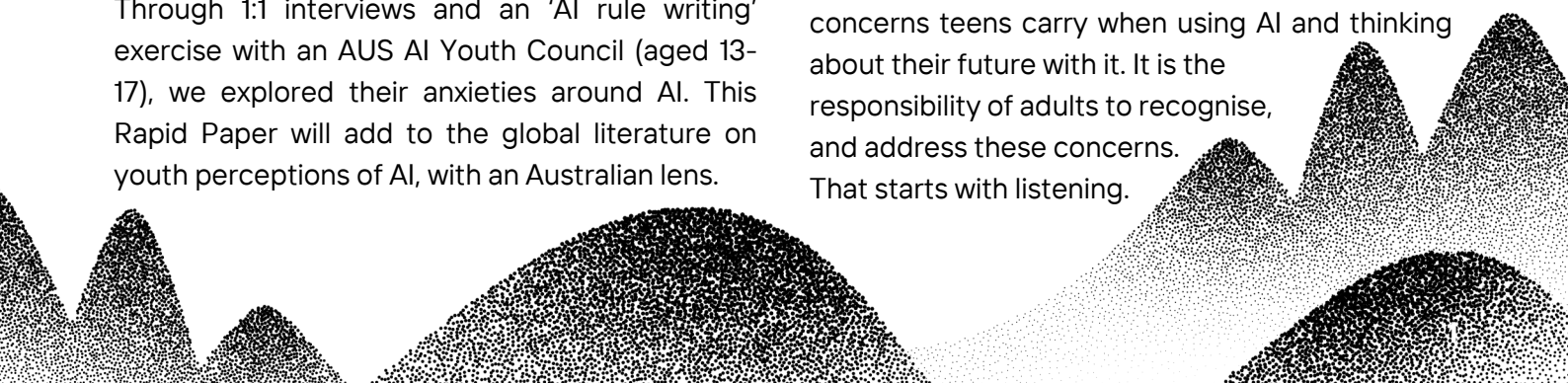
Through 1:1 interviews and an 'AI rule writing' exercise with an AUS AI Youth Council (aged 13-17), we explored their anxieties around AI. This Rapid Paper will add to the global literature on youth perceptions of AI, with an Australian lens.

Like their global peers,ⁱ these teens have experienced real assistance with AI primarily with school work. These positive interactions have brought a sense of relief, curiosity, awe and competence. But those positive experiences sit alongside other worries, concerns and anxieties.

” *I have mixed emotions, I don't have one particular feeling*

” *I have mixed feelings, I don't know where I sit*

This rapid paper will isolate those feelings; the concerns teens carry when using AI and thinking about their future with it. It is the responsibility of adults to recognise, and address these concerns. That starts with listening.



2. Media Amplified Anxieties

Teen worries don't exist in a vacuum. This council recalled specific viral TikToks and news articles, made by adults and other young people, that amplified their fears about AI far beyond the classroom.

Untrustworthy leaders

The founders of AI companies have reached celebrity status. Sam Altman and Elon Musk are regular instalments on their TikTok feeds. Young people recall being affected by their words, and that distrust generalises: not just the tools, but who is steering them and why.

“ I don't like many AI officials, CEOs and representatives. They are many time's they've dismissed responsibility for AI actions – endorsing suicides even – and spoken very ignorantly on the effect AI can have on creativity.

“ I see clips of Sam Altman [on social media]. This is what AI is being used for, this is what AI officials have to say about it. This is ridiculous.

These teens questioned the incentives at play, worrying that companies optimise for engagement and profit over people: locking the best models behind paywalls, training on copyrighted work, and designing for engagement at the cost of factual accuracy. Teens engage in sophisticated reasoning and are actively tracing specific concerns back to the people in charge.

Environmental harm

Eco anxiety affects more than two-thirds of Australian youth.ⁱⁱ For this council, eco concerns have extended to include the negative impact of AI infrastructure;ⁱⁱⁱ often amplified by viral posts [see media spotlight 1]

“ I've seen a lot of content about the water usage of AI. I'm especially concerned about the new data centres..

“ Every time you [prompt] please it uses a glass of water

“ Data centers use a lot of water....how is this allowed?

Shrinking career opportunities

Teenagers describe an anticipatory fear that 'AI takes jobs', even though most aren't yet employed, and some have no clear career in mind to feel it about. The fear arrives ahead of the experience, largely through their feeds.

“ I'm worried because I see a lot of propaganda online where it says AI is going to take our jobs

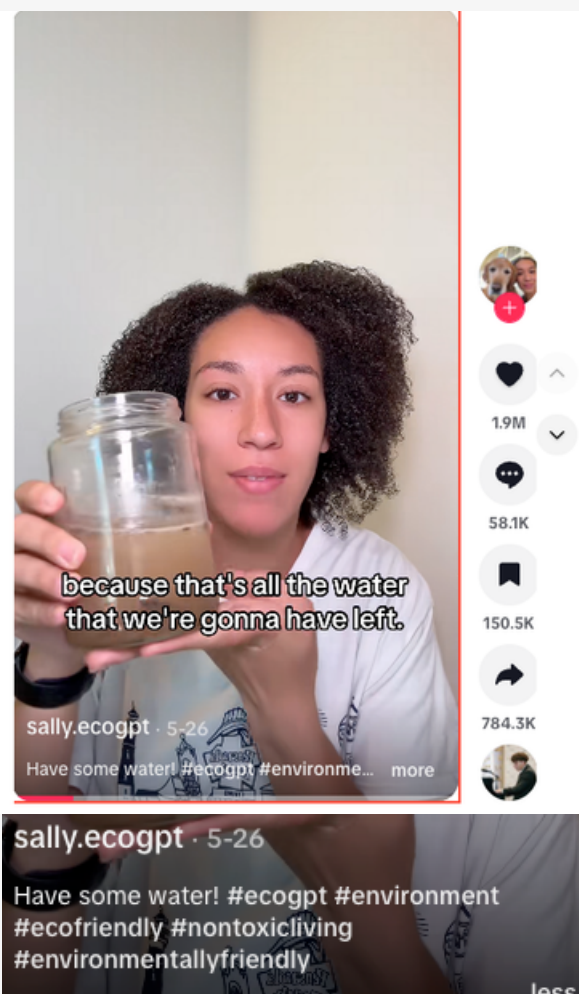
“ My job may get stolen by an AI in the future

This tracks a global pattern of job inconsistency, and job loss ranks among young people's top AI concerns.^{iv, v} Implications are discussed in section 4.

/media spotlight 1

18.9 Million views [as of 1st July '26]

EcoGPT uses UGC to spread viral posts where influencers hold up dirty water, attributing the use of ChatGPT to the destruction of drinking water.



3. Key Classroom Concerns

Where the wider-world fears are amplified through a screen, these anxieties are amplified through personal experience. Here are three key concerns the council raised as they describe negotiating *when* to use AI, *how much* and in *what way*.

AI as a threat to human thought

**“It’ll
damage my
brain”**

A primary concern raised from this council, was that by using AI they are harming the development of their brain. This anxiety is related to concerns of over-reliance and loss of critical thinking,^{iv} and describes a fear that using AI can interrupt the growth of a still developing brain.

“ My math teacher told us that the more we use AI, the smarter it gets, and the dumber we’ll get.

“ I saw research done with AI and it said it impacted the function of your brain and that’s always sat in the back of my mind. [see media spotlight 2]

“ [when I’m using AI] I’m not challenging that part of my brain, so I’m not developing it and growing it.

Teens described challenges finding the line between seeking help from AI vs delegating too much of the core task to AI, stripping out the learnings and growth.

“ I often find myself using it too much and eventually forgetting concepts I used to know, needing to relearn them.

Notably, cheating was *not* the council’s main worry about overusing AI, despite it dominating adult and media discussion.

For these teens, AI reads as a threat to thought itself: an essential part of being human.

“ [AI] takes the human nature out of learning, replacing it with fake intellect.

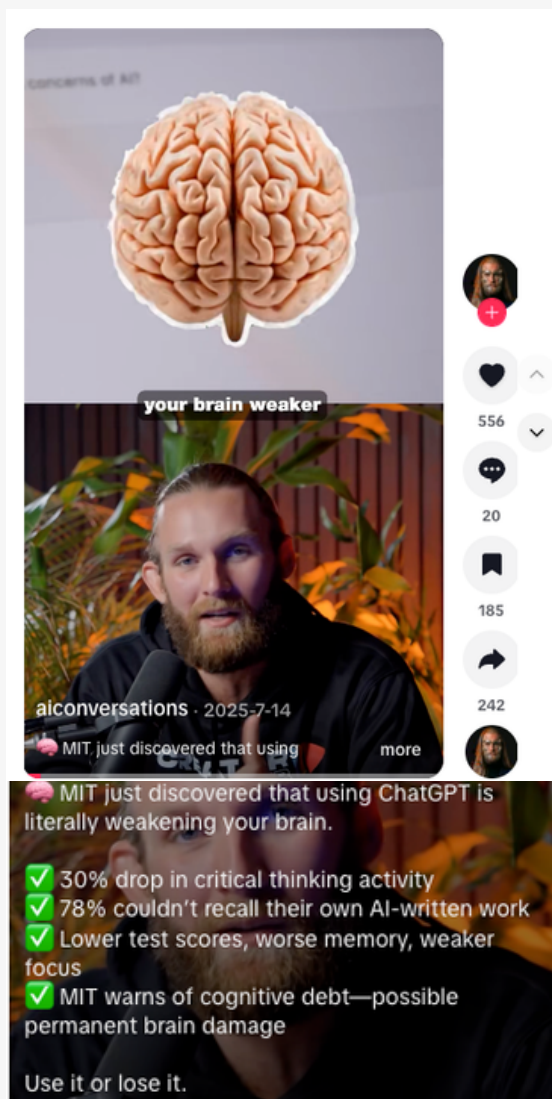
“ Removing the ability to think removes our human nature

“ If you let it do the thinking for you, it defeats the purpose, you’re supposed to think, You don’t change the world by getting AI to do the thinking for you.

The teenagers in this council emphasise the importance of *cognitive* integrity, which surfaces as a concern more often than *academic* integrity. The implications will be discussed further in section 4.

/media spotlight 2

A MIT study was shared on social media voicing concern that these risks were amplified for young people.



“AI could eliminate human creativity”

Teens worry about a loss of personal, and societal creativity as a result of AI. Looking forward, they envision a future where productivity is prioritised above creative expression.

“ I can definitely imagine a future where AI automation and the obsession with productivity causes a great increase of productivity and destroys human creativity and communication.

“ AI increases productivity, but productivity can subtract from our creativity

“ It's so important to keep unique creativity of art apart from AI, it's so easy to use AI to generate paintings or drawings, but it's the process that matters. That shouldn't be taken away from society. ..I like the process of figuring out along the way what I'm drawing, just to see where my mind takes me.

Whilst schools had different policies, every school saw AI use as a gradient (see 'in focus' box). Using AI for creative brainstorming and soliciting ideas was seen as a lite, acceptable use case. For many young people, this brought relief at a time where they felt under pressure to ideate.

“ we might have 5 minutes to come up with ideas, that's really hard, so you can just ask AI

But for others, using AI to generate ideas raised alarms: it can narrow the range of ideas in a group and lead to idea fixation.

“ I go to AI and it gives me ideas, and suddenly I just can't seem to think of my own ideas because I read their and I'm just like those are so much better than I could have written, and then I get writers block, because anytime I try and write, it's just what AI said.

/in focus AI use spectrum

A number of schools tell students how to use AI according to a gradient.^{vi}

Assignments shared with us were either red or orange.

“ “I've never seen a [level] green”

“ “I've never had a 5”

Teens questioned the use of a scale that is never fully utilised.

“ They have this whole policy but they really just stick to [the first two levels]

1	NO AI
2	AI-ASSISTED IDEA GENERATION AND STRUCTURING
3	AI-ASSISTED EDITING
4	AI TASK COMPLETION, HUMAN EVALUATION
5	FULL AI

Version 1, which has now been updated ^{vii}

The youth council revealed a tension in how AI is implemented in their classrooms. Treating AI ideation as 'acceptable' while restricting AI for execution can, for some young people, undercut the value of ideas 'from the heart', leaving them demotivated about their own contribution.

“ I realised how detrimental this creativity destroyer has been to my creative thinking, replacing imagination with endless prompts and idea brainstorming with the chatbot. The greatest ideas are ones not scoured from the internet, but those that come from the heart, a real heart.

“ When AI thinks creatively for you it discourages thinking and replaces it with passive creative and mindless copying

“ The idea that AI stunts creativity... it takes away from what humans can do...it takes away our motivation and smothers ambition. You can just plug it into AI.

AI as a restricted technology

“It’s a negative incident. We’ll get in trouble.”

Whilst the council expressed curiosity and enthusiasm about AI, their use in the classroom was also tinged with confusion and, at times, fear. They described harsh punishments and unclear expectations about how they should use AI.

“when you get caught, it’s a negative incident that gets sent to your parents”

“I got caught in year 5, and they threatened to call my parents”

Even where school policies exist, expectations varied teacher to teacher. Students were unsure how AI use was detected, or how the fuzzy lines between levels of use were policed.

“We’ll get in trouble if we use AI, it’s an automatic zero...i think they have their own tool to check if it’s AI”

“When [my science teacher] is marking he’s got an AI checker, except I don’t know if it works”

“we haven’t been taught the rules, which is kind of concerning”

Every member of the council also raised AI’s hallucinations and false quotes as a real risk. Under time pressure, fact-checking every output is hard, and a slip could look like misuse.

“[this quote provided by a LLM] is not true, you’re not going to fool a HSC marker who knows this text like the back of their hands

Strict policies, the council suggests, can misread the support teens actually need. Even academically engaged students turn to AI out of fear of failure or an overwhelming workload.

“I think a lot of adults especially think that we cheat because we’re lazy or don’t want to put in the work. Nowadays kids are so busy with sport and extracurricular things, we don’t have time and in the moment we may feel pressure to cheat

“One of my friends is in an extension program. She used AI in an exam, she thought she’d fail. Her parents are really strict and have high expectations, so it’s good for her to help dig herself out...

Here, excessive AI use is a signal for struggling motivation, overwhelm and a perceived inability to meet high standards.

Rather than addressing this root problem, harsh and unclear policies push young peoples help seeking behaviour into the shadows, where they spend time changing the words or running their output through an AI checker until it passes as human.

“I’m not sure what happened [when I was flagged for AI use and punished]. I was very confused...now I just make sure to change the words

/tool spotlight

With access to AI tools blocked or restricted, young people are vulnerable to products making unverified claims about their efficacy, such as ‘exam predict’ promising to predict your upcoming exam questions with 70% accuracy

AI-Powered Exam Predict Preparation

EXAM PREDICT

PRACTICE WHAT'S RELEVANT

PRACTICE THE 1000+ HIGH-PROBABILITY QUESTIONS OUR AI HAS IDENTIFIED FROM 10 YEARS OF EXAM PATTERNS

70%
ACCURACY

1000+
QUESTIONS

50,000+
STUDENTS

→ SELECT YOUR EXAM

4. Implications

These concerns are an invitation to a conversation with the adults in power: policymakers, technologists, educators and guardians.

Teens worry about adults' AI use

Many of these anxieties aren't about how teens use AI, they're about how adults do. Young people are watching how those in power build and deploy AI, and judging whether it's ethical, fair and balanced.

“ AI is often trained on people's work who are not compensated or have not agreed to it.

“ AI should be made by governments, not by companies. The leaders for AI make and develop AI for the purpose of money and pleasing shareholders rather than the people that actually use it..

In a recent survey of teens in the US,^{viii} 15% were 'conscious abstainers', choosing not to use AI due to environmental, ethical or artistic concerns. Building on this resistance, teenagers are starting to act; from student-led protests against AI datacentres on the Sunshine Coast (AUS)^{ix} to youth-led initiatives shaping policy (e.g aiconsensus.org, designitforus.org) globally.

Their concerns hold up a mirror: many of the fixes teens want start with adults. We owe it to young people to address our own behaviour with the same level of concern we have about their use of AI.

Below is a series of jumping-off points and starters that the insights from this council ignite.

Questions and starters

The council's concerns point to gaps in how we communicate, educate and include young people in this next technological shift. Some of this work may already be in motion across different organisations; these starters are meant to open a conversation grounded in what these teens told us.

Anxiety insight	Question/starter
Media amplified concerns many teens' fears are viral-driven (ecogpt, MIT "brain rot," "AI takes jobs"), and a number of those claims are exaggerated or contested	How might AI literacy programming look beyond the technical workings of models, to include science based evidence on the cognitive and environmental impacts of AI? How can Leaders in AI need to speak to young people, not just about them? Is 'AI Eco Anxiety' a widespread concern and if so, how does it impact young people?
Threat to human thought Students share concern around <i>cognitive</i> integrity, over voicing concerns about <i>academic</i> integrity.	What would AI guidance look like that speaks to cognitive integrity rather than academic integrity? What would an AI school policy look like that emphasises independent thought and is 'brain rot' resistant? ^x Are there any youth led cultural movements that can be amplified with <u>funding</u> , e.g., IRL 'no-AI' peer to peer study support groups, youth-led AI literacy (innoforeveryone.org) or AI detox campaigns (nosonovember.org).
AI as a creativity destroyer for some students, using AI for ideation causes idea-fixation and stifles motivation.	How can schools protect young people's role in creative ideation, and examine the impact of AI policies on motivation? Where are the gaps between the intended use of frameworks [i.e. AI use spectrum, AUS framework for GenAI in schools] and implementation?
Restricted technology and opaque detection methods unrealistic level setting (i.e. 'level 1, no AI use'), unclear detection methods and harsh penalties can drive students towards evasive strategies	Could heavy AI use sometimes be a signal about workload or wellbeing, better met with support than punishment? How might AI tools be aware of the 'levels' that have been set for each assignment; and give students confidence they've used AI in an acceptable way? How can detection strategies be more transparent?



Quick start discussion guide for guardians

The ways young people use AI are often invisible to parents and guardians. Several members of our council described feeling misunderstood by the adults around them, or finding it hard to talk about their AI use.

These questions are a starting point, best approached with curiosity, kindness and a plate of cookies, not judgment (or an empty stomach). There are no wrong answers!

Question: Have you tried more than one AI? Maybe Perplexity, Grok, ChatGPT or Claude? Or others that have more of a character appearance, like CharacterAI, Replika or PolyBuzz AI? Which one do you like best, and why?

Question: What have you found AI to be really helpful for? What have you found it to be downright terrible at?

Question: How do you think other teenagers are using AI?

Question: Have you ever noticed AI changing how you think about coming up with ideas? How can you tell what's 'yours'?

Question: How does your school handle AI? Do the rules feel clear and fair to you?

Question: Is there anything about AI that worries you? Do you see anything about AI on socials that worries you? Can I see?

Question: Sometimes people reach for AI when things feel like too much, or too confusing, or they're just too tired! Is there anything feeling hard right now that AI helps with? Can I help with any of these things, too?

Offer up: Share how you use (or don't use) AI.

A note on scope: This is a rapid, qualitative write-up. It is part of a series of rapid papers produced over the course of working with an AI youth council. The AI Youth Council is a cohort of 13-17 year olds working with researchers from the University of Sydney over 3 months [June-August, 2026]. Alongside academic papers, the council provides feedback on these rapid papers which spin out from the general program of work to respond to insights that are more timely in manner.

The AI Youth Council comprises of 20 teenagers aged 13–17, based in NSW. They attend a mix of independent, selective, faith-based and public schools. Members were culturally diverse, with a slight majority using he/him pronouns. This paper surfaces the concerns these young people hold and the questions they raise; it does not measure how widespread those concerns are across AUS teens.

A note on methodology: This rapid analysis was inspired by Digital Child's rapid analysis of Roblox, which was published in 2024. The analysis was undertaken by a small team of researchers over a short period of time in 2026. The insights are from a current study that is still in progress.

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