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The small island that refuses to think small – reflections from Mauritius

Beyond efficiency: reimagining higher education in the era of generative AI

Leading for student success beyond the classroom

HE Horizons.

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Contents

4 Welcome

Advance HE Chief Executive Alistair Jarvis CBE introduces the fourth edition of HE Horizons

5 The small island that refuses to think small – reflections from Mauritius

Dr the Hon. Kaviraj Sharma Sukon, PFHEA, HFCoL, Minister of Tertiary Education, Science and Research, Republic of Mauritius

7 Is inclusive leadership even possible in troubled times?

Professor Steve Olivier, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Robert Gordon University, Scotland

10 Beyond efficiency: reimagining higher education in the era of generative AI

Professor Jennifer Cleland, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, with Dr Nadia Delanoy and Dr Fiona Couillard, both University of Calgary, Canada

13 The future of higher education: what kind of leaders do we need now?

Stuart Norton, Head of Educational Excellence, Advance HE

Contents

18 Leading in an age of AI - why foresight has become an essential leadership capability for higher education

Professor Fehmida Hussain, PFHEA, Deputy Director at Middlesex University Dubai

21 Leading for student success beyond the classroom

Professor Steven Warburton, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education Innovation), University of Newcastle, Australia

23 The art of leading a university like a world-class orchestra

Dr Rana Sawaya Zeitounie, President, University College of Bahrain

27 Why higher education needs intentional serendipity

Valarie Williams-Foy, Head of Leadership Development & Lead for the Imperial Leadership Academy

30 What universities are for in the age of AI

Laura Maska, PFHEA, Managing Director of Aegean College, Greece



Welcome

Welcome to the fourth edition of HE Horizons.

This edition focuses on leadership: the capabilities, mindsets and structures that will play a significant role in determining which institutions thrive amid change, uncertainty and technological disruption.

Higher education leaders are now expected to combine an ability to lead people through uncertainty, with an understanding of digital transformation, financial acumen, regulatory awareness and a clear sense of institutional purpose. The contributions gathered in this edition of HE Horizons bring that expectation to life – and I am very grateful to all our contributors for sharing their insights with us.

Several themes recur, often from very different starting points. Inclusive leadership is tested most severely precisely when resources are tightest, not when times are easy. The question posed by generative AI is not whether to permit it, but how institutions support responsible use and look for opportunities, whilst redesigning assessment and curriculum so that human judgement remains central. Culture, not strategy documents, is largely what determines whether transformation succeeds, and that culture is built through trust, participation and genuine partnership with students and staff. And leadership itself is becoming less about having answers and more about creating the conditions in which better answers can emerge, whether that is described as foresight, adaptive leadership, joint problem-solving or intentional serendipity.

What I find most striking, reading these contributions together, is how consistent these leadership challenges are across systems that are diverse in scale, funding model or national context. That consistency is precisely why Advance HE's global convening power matters. HE Horizons exists to bring together a community of thought leadership from across our global membership. This edition draws on contributions from Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Greece, Mauritius, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom. Few educational organisations are positioned to gather that breadth of experience and put it into direct conversation, and I am proud that Advance HE can do this.

HE Horizons has now been running for a year, and I hope you have enjoyed reading it. We are grateful to our many contributors for their thought-provoking articles, which continue to generate conversation long after publication. You can find back copies here.

Looking ahead, our fifth edition will focus on leading change: governance, structure and organisational transformation. If you are interested in contributing, please get in touch with our communications team for more information. The deadline for copy is Friday 16 October.

Thank you for your continued engagement with this publication and with our global community of practice.

Alistair Jarvis CBE
Chief Executive

The small island that refuses to think small – reflections from Mauritius



Dr the Hon. Kaviraj Sharma Sukon, PFHEA, HFCoL, Minister of Tertiary Education, Science and Research, Republic of Mauritius

Ask a lecture theatre of first-year students who has used generative AI this week, and nearly every hand goes up. Ask the same question of their examiners, and the hands come up more slowly. That gap - between how our students already work and how our institutions still assess - is, to my mind, the real generative AI challenge in higher education. The technology did not break our universities. It exposed what was already fragile.

For decades, much of higher education has quietly rewarded reproduction: remember what was taught, arrange it acceptably, return it on time. Generative AI performs that task instantly, fluently and free of charge. So the machine has not made our degrees worthless; it has made one particular kind of assessment worthless. We should thank it for the clarity and then get to work.

Mauritius comes to this question from a particular vantage point. We are a nation of 1.3 million people in the middle of the Indian Ocean, with no oil, no minerals and no hinterland - only our people. Higher education is not one sector among many for us; it is the national strategy. Through our Study in Mauritius campaign we are inviting the students of Africa, Asia and beyond to make our island their campus - a safe, multilingual, ocean-going crossroads between continents because internationalisation, for us, is not a revenue line. It is the classroom itself: AI-era graduates will work in teams that span cultures and time zones, and a lecture hall that already does so is the best rehearsal we can offer.

A small island with that ambition cannot afford to get artificial intelligence wrong. So we have chosen a deliberate response, and it rests on three refusals.

First, we refuse to ban. Prohibition is the reflex of institutions that assess reproduction; it is unenforceable, it is dishonest, and it teaches students that the most consequential technology of their working lives is something to be hidden from their teachers. Our direction of travel is the opposite: use it, declare it, cite it, and be examined on what you added to it. And we are not leaving institutions to improvise.

Under our National Strategy for Higher Education, Science and Research 2025–2035 we have amended the Higher Education Act and issued national AI regulations and guidelines for the sector, so that every institution works to one clear rulebook on disclosure, integrity and the responsible use of these tools - while redesigning assessment towards the things a machine cannot sit: the viva, the practicum, the studio, the placement, the defended argument. Assess the process and the person, not merely the product, and the integrity problem shrinks to a manageable size.



Secondly, we refuse to treat AI as a threat to academics rather than a claim upon them. I spent 12 years leading an open university before entering government, and I learned there that technology never replaces teachers; it replaces teaching that was already indifferent. The lecturer who questions, provokes, supervises and inspires has never been more necessary. That is why our reforms invest in people first: national upskilling in AI literacy for academic staff; a new National Research and Innovation Institute, established this year, to put research - including research on and with AI - at the centre of the system; and micro-credentials with the force of law.

Mauritius, I am proud to say, is the first country in the world to write micro-credentials into its higher education legislation: short, stackable, quality-assured learning that counts towards real qualifications. In an age when AI redraws job descriptions faster than degree programmes can be rewritten, a legal architecture for lifelong learning is not an accessory. It is the point.



Thirdly, we refuse to let this become a privilege. For a small developing state, generative AI is potentially the greatest equaliser higher education has ever seen. A student in a remote village now carries in her pocket a tireless tutor that a student in London pays nothing more for. But that promise is conditional. It requires connectivity, it requires devices, and above all it requires the critical faculty to interrogate what the machine returns - because a confident falsehood delivered instantly is more dangerous than ignorance delivered slowly. Teaching students to doubt well is now core curriculum. In Mauritius we say it plainly: the machine drafts; the graduate judges.

None of this is comfortable for leaders, and I will not pretend otherwise. It demands honesty - about how much of our assessment was vulnerable long before 2022. Imagination - because the answer to AI is not a detection arms race but a redesign of what we ask students to demonstrate. And humility - because our students are, in this one domain, often ahead of us, and the institutions that listen to them will adapt fastest.

I am asked in every international meeting: are you not afraid that AI will devalue your degrees? My answer is always the same. A degree was never meant to certify that a human can do what a machine does. It certifies judgement, character, method and the capacity to keep learning. Generative AI has simply forced us to mean it.

The machines, we are told, are learning to think. Good. Our task - in Port Louis as in every capital - is to make sure we are still teaching humans to. That is a challenge worthy of this generation of higher education leaders, and Mauritius, small as we are, intends to meet it in full.

Is inclusive leadership even possible in troubled times?



Professor Steve Olivier, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Robert Gordon University, Scotland

I'll begin with a provocation. When institutions are under financial pressure, when difficult decisions must be made, when livelihoods are affected, does inclusion become a casualty of necessity? Is inclusive leadership something we practise in good times but set aside when the stakes are highest? Or is it in those moments that it matters most?

I'll explore these questions through a concrete experience: our Finance Transformation Project (FTP) at Robert Gordon University, a programme that reshaped almost every aspect of how we operate and resulted in many colleagues leaving the University. It was one of the most complex, consequential and deeply human undertakings of my career.

Ubuntu and the relational nature of leadership

I hold a deep belief, shaped in part by my South African background, that inclusive leadership is neither fundamentally about consensus, nor about appointed authority. Rather, it is about how we engage people. That belief finds expression in the African philosophy of Ubuntu - 'I am because we are', or 'we are because of each other'. Leadership, Ubuntu reminds us, is relational. Institutions are communities. Our humanity is defined by how we treat others, even if they disagree with our decisions.

The context: troubled times

Around two and a half years ago, we identified a significant forecast deficit, with the risk of ongoing structural deficits if no action was taken. We had a choice: delay and hope, or act early and decisively. We chose to act.

The FTP involved structural redesign of our Schools and Professional Services, cost reduction, workforce change and a new operating model. One hundred and eighty-eight colleagues left the University. The question of inclusive leadership was not theoretical. It was immediate, uncomfortable and deeply personal.

Principles under pressure

In navigating this, I returned to principles I have held throughout my career: build trust through honesty and communication; be open and transparent, even when the message is difficult; respect people's contribution and dignity; encourage participation and challenge; take responsibility for mistakes, and above all, be kinder than necessary, even if you are not perceived as being kind.

These principles are tested most in times of crisis. Alongside them, we drew on what I describe as the 6Ps of transformational change (Purpose, Principles, Practice, Participation, Pace and Pre-mortem). If one of the Ps defines inclusive leadership above all others, it is Participation, because inclusion is not about agreement, it is about voice, engagement and ownership.

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Fiona Lennoxsmith, Yulia Sobol, Charlotte Rutter and Barbara Bassa discuss the future of women's leadership.

What inclusive leadership actually looked like

Critically important was ownership. Deans, Directors and Heads were involved directly in developing restructuring proposals and shaping savings plans. We should probably have actioned this engagement earlier in the process - a lesson learned. The most deliberate choice we made was around communication, not just speaking, but listening. From the outset, I made a commitment to openness with staff, students, trade unions, Board members and external stakeholders. This included regular town halls, open Q&A sessions, drop-in sessions and sustained engagement with unions even when that dialogue was very challenging. It led to enhanced voluntary severance terms and extended timelines so that as many colleagues as possible could leave voluntarily.

We also conducted a staff survey during this period, at a time when many peers were avoiding doing so. The results were uncomfortable: a 14% drop in staff commitment and significant concerns about clarity of direction. But listening to criticism and responding to it honestly is not optional.

Crucially, we resisted the default response of salami-slicing. Instead, we asked a more fundamental question: what should RGU look like to be sustainable, distinctive and successful?

That produced a Target Operating Model, reducing our Schools from 12 to 7, streamlining Professional Services from 21 departments to 13 directorates, and realigned our structure with sector norms. We were not just reducing. We were reshaping with purpose.

Results, tensions and mistakes

We acted early and decisively. In terms of impact, we maintained institutional stability, preserved stakeholder confidence and delivered the transformation on schedule. Several Vice-Chancellor colleagues have since approached me to learn from our experience.

But there were real difficulties. Morale declined. With hindsight, the University Management Group should have been involved earlier in strategic decision-making. Feedback loops were not always strong enough. In striving for honesty, my communication was sometimes perceived as overly negative in tone. The pace of change was genuinely difficult for many people, and there is a human cost, despite the best of intentions.

Inclusive leadership does not make difficult decisions easier. It does, however, ensure that people feel informed, listened to and treated with dignity.



Looking forward: inclusion as a practice, not an event

We are now progressing our Roadmap to 2030 - our ambition is to become the UK's leading work-integrated university. We started developing this at the same time as cutting costs, recognising that we needed to give people confidence in the future of the institution. Inclusive leadership is not incidental to how we shape that future. It is central to it. We are focusing on fewer, clearer priorities; involving colleagues at all levels in shaping the Roadmap; creating genuine space for challenge; and actively working to reduce change fatigue and manage workloads.

The question inclusive leadership must continually answer is a simple one: do people feel they are part of the journey?

The provocation answered

Is inclusive leadership possible in troubled times? My answer is yes, but it is not about avoiding hard decisions or achieving universal agreement. It is about how we make decisions, who we involve, how honestly we communicate, and how we treat people along the way.

The key lessons: transparency builds trust, but tone and balance matter. Participation must be meaningful, not symbolic. Communication must balance honesty with confidence. Acting earlier, in better times, can significantly reduce the severity of later decisions.

Ubuntu teaches us that our humanity is bound up with one another's. 'I am because we are.' Our collective future depends on whether we can sustain that sense of shared purpose even, and especially, after the hardest of times.



From lecture hall to leadership: bridging the academic-manager divide through Principal Fellowship

Drawing on her dual academic and leadership experience, TUS Careers & Employability Manager, Aoife Prendergast, explores her journey to achieving Principal Fellowship and its strategic impact.

Beyond efficiency: reimagining higher education in the era of generative AI

Professor Jennifer Cleland, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, with Dr Nadia Delanoy and Dr Fiona Couillard, both University of Calgary, Canada



Over the last several years, conversations about generative AI in higher education have shifted rapidly from polarized debates about academic misconduct and automation toward broader questions about learning, workforce readiness, institutional credibility and ethical governance.

The question now is not whether we use AI but how we use AI to best support and enhance student curiosity, creativity and critical inquiry. Traditional academic frameworks offer no precedent for the rapid evolution of GenAI. Addressing shifts in student learning, workforce readiness and ethical governance demands rigorous, high-quality applied research to generate the new knowledge needed to inform institutional decision-making and practices. Without this, there is a risk that policies and strategies will be based on old ways of working and thinking which are no longer fit-for-purpose given the AI landscape.

Unfortunately, at this juncture, researchers in this space are attempting to catch up as the speed of technological advancement is unprecedented.

Many of the initial studies into the impact of GenAI on education can be described as descriptive ("what we did"). Others focus on justification (eg "we did this and the students liked it"). Both types of study are essential for two reasons. First, any change in how something is done or what is taught needs to bring onside all stakeholders. One way of achieving buy-in is to demonstrate (justify and validate) the acceptability and effectiveness of a new approach locally, whether AI-related or not. However, this type of research is highly situated and instrumental. Second, only after proof of value and effectiveness are confirmed can process and impact scrutiny happen. While there is still much justification research in AI - in health professions education studies looking at how well AI performs on medical examinations compared to human candidates are particularly repetitive - we are starting to see studies which are focused on building knowledge guided by sound theoretical foundations. This is important: such clarification research is essential for building knowledge and new ways of knowing, to advance what is known about AI in learning and education.

Here we give some examples which illustrate the kind of clarification research which is critical to provide evidence to underpin decision making.





Our first example focuses on how students use AI in their everyday self-study practices. The rise of GenAI has led to debates over its promise to support student learning to encourage cognitive offloading at the expense of developing critical thinking and reasoning skills. In a study published recently in the journal Medical Teacher, we (Cleland and colleagues from Singapore and the USA) invited students to share and reflect on their actual interactions with GenAI tools. In doing so, we were able to examine not only the functions these tools served, but also how they influenced engagement, reasoning and learning.

We were pleasantly surprised to find that medical students interacted with GenAI in complex, sophisticated and varied ways during their self-study. For example, our participants rarely used AI for passive content generation. Even when the purpose was to extract and summarise information, they usually exercised some level of evaluative judgment and reflection, comparing GenAI outputs with other sources of information. Students viewed GenAI as an unreliable collaborator and evaluated its outputs against prior knowledge and task significance. We concluded that students should be guided with targeted AI literacy and competency development to tap on the unreliability of GenAI to foster critical engagement and uncertainty tolerance, a key element of creativity.

Our second example focused on what GenAI can bring in terms of efficiency. Universities and industries alike are exploring how AI can accelerate workflows, reduce administrative burdens and optimize performance. Yet emerging research with post-secondary students suggests that learners themselves may be envisioning a more human-centred role for these technologies. For example, in studies conducted across Canadian post-secondary contexts (Delanoy and colleagues in Canada published in various journals including the European Journal of Education), students in education, accounting and business programs reflected a complex and often contradictory relationship with GenAI.

While many used AI tools to support studying, brainstorming and exam preparation, they had a strong preference for human-oriented feedback and instructor guidance when engaging in complex learning tasks. Interestingly, students often became more critical and sceptical of AI-generated outputs as their disciplinary expertise increased, suggesting that deeper knowledge may strengthen, rather than diminish, critical engagement with these technologies. These findings challenge the assumption that students simply want AI to make learning faster or easier. Instead, many appeared to value GenAI as a complementary support within broader learning environments grounded in human interaction, critical reflection and disciplinary judgment.

Perhaps most revealing was the direction students chose when asked to work in interdisciplinary teams using GenAI to address complex societal issues. Rather than focusing primarily on productivity-oriented applications, many gravitated toward deeply human concerns such as mental health, bullying and unemployment. Students viewed AI not simply as a mechanism for efficiency, but as a potential tool to support social problem-solving, inclusion and human wellbeing when guided ethically and thoughtfully.

It seems that, at a time when institutional and industry conversations often frame AI primarily through the lenses of automation and workforce efficiency, students themselves may be signalling a desire for something different: educational experiences that preserve human connection, ethical judgment, creativity and social responsibility alongside technological capability.

The challenge for higher education, therefore, is not simply preparing students to use AI tools, but preparing them to critically and responsibly shape how these technologies are used in education and in society. To wit, a student who has developed discernment through connected, creative learning can engage with AI as a thinking partner, interrogating its outputs, recognizing its limits, deciding when to push back. A student who has not will defer. They will outsource the thinking they were never given the conditions to practice.



Professor Harriet Dunbar-Morris and Dr Helen Murphy explore the evolving purpose of lifelong learning in higher education.

Ensuring learners engage with GenAI productively is not an AI problem. It is a pedagogy problem which needs pedagogy solutions. Identifying and evaluating potential solutions requires transdisciplinary research into how connection, creativity and discernment are developed across learner stages, and how those conditions can be deliberately designed into disciplinary teaching.

Fundamentally, going forward, research into the role(s) of AI in education must build on what has come before, identify and address gaps in knowledge and be guided by sound theoretical and methodological foundations. The future of higher education will not be determined by whether AI enters our classrooms - it already has - but by whether institutions can thoughtfully redesign learning incorporating GenAI in ways that remain deeply human.





The future of higher education: what kind of leaders do we need now?

The future of higher education will not be defined by strategies alone. It will be shaped by leaders who can translate ambition into systems and values into practice.



Stuart Norton, Head of Educational Excellence, Advance HE

One of the interesting things about leadership in higher education is that many people never consciously set out to become leaders.

Some are given a formal title. Others simply become the person people turn to when things are difficult, uncertain, or need moving forward. In universities especially, leadership often happens long before it appears on an organisational chart.

That matters because the challenges facing higher education now are not confined to senior leadership teams. They sit everywhere: in programme design meetings, personal tutoring conversations, assessment decisions, curriculum reviews, student support discussions, professional services planning, and increasingly in the spaces between them.

So while this article is aimed at new leaders, I suspect much of it applies more broadly to the growing number of "accidental leaders" across the sector - people trying to improve systems, support students and navigate complexity whether leadership sits in their job title or not.

Because the future of higher education will not be shaped solely through strategy documents or institutional visions. It will be shaped through thousands of day-to-day decisions about what we value, what we reward, what we prioritise, and who our systems actually work for.

And at the centre of all of this sits a question I think the sector is still wrestling with: what does student success really mean now?

We often talk about the student experience as though it is something institutions design. In reality, it is something students live through. Increasingly, that lived experience is pressured, fragmented, financially difficult and uncertain. Which means the future conversation cannot simply be about improving "experience" as a collection of services, initiatives or satisfaction scores. It has to become about student success as a whole-system outcome. Not a KPI. Not a dashboard. But an organising principle for how institutions actually function.

Moving beyond survivor bias

One of the biggest risks in how higher education currently talks about success is survivor bias. Too often, systems are designed around the students who naturally navigate university successfully - the students who engage easily, understand the hidden rules, access support confidently and ultimately progress into positive graduate outcomes.

But the future credibility of higher education may depend far more on how well institutions design for the students who do not naturally thrive within existing structures:

- students balancing paid work with study.
- students with caring responsibilities.
- students navigating cost-of-living pressures.
- students who do not see themselves reflected in curricula, cultures or institutional norms.



...the future credibility of higher education may depend far more on how well institutions design for the students who do not naturally thrive within existing structures.

If our understanding of success is built primarily around those already most likely to succeed, then education risks becoming less about transformation and more about selection. That creates an uncomfortable but necessary leadership question:
Are we supporting students through difficult systems, or are we willing to redesign the systems themselves? That shift matters. It moves the conversation from:
"How do we help students succeed?" to:
"How do we create environments where success is more likely by default?"

And that is not simply a technical or operational issue. It is fundamentally a leadership challenge. Because it requires people willing to question long-standing assumptions about what a "good" student looks like, whose behaviours institutions reward, and where inherited structures unintentionally advantage some groups while disadvantaging others. Those are rarely easy conversations. But they are increasingly unavoidable ones.

Designing systems, not services

Higher education has traditionally become very good at building services: careers support sits in one area; wellbeing somewhere else. Academic development elsewhere again.

The problem is students do not experience university in neatly separated functions. They experience it as one system.



The institutions making the most meaningful progress are often not the ones adding the greatest number of initiatives. They are the ones creating greater coherence between the things they already do. That means employability embedded within learning, rather than bolted onto it afterwards. Assessment designed to develop judgement and confidence, not simply measure recall. Support visible early enough to prevent crisis, rather than appearing only once problems escalate.

Most universities already know this conceptually. The challenge is rarely awareness. The challenge is execution across complexity. And this is where leadership becomes particularly important for newer leaders entering the sector now. The work increasingly involves operating across boundaries rather than within silos. It requires people who can hold a whole-system view while recognising that decisions made in one part of an institution inevitably create consequences somewhere else.

It also requires a different type of influence. Often the people making the biggest difference are not those with the largest teams or budgets, but those able to connect agendas, reduce friction and bring others with them across organisational divides. In many ways, the future of leadership in higher education may depend less on positional authority and more on systems-thinking.

Employability, AI and the adaptable graduate

Higher education also needs a more honest conversation about employability.

Many of the traditional approaches still matter - CV support, interview preparation, transferable skills development - but increasingly they feel insufficient for the scale of change now happening around work, technology and AI.

The future workplace is unlikely to reward static expertise alone. It will increasingly reward adaptability, judgement, curiosity, interpretation and the ability to navigate ambiguity.

AI will continue to automate predictable processes and routine cognitive tasks. That means the distinctively human areas of value become more important, not less. Connecting ideas. Interpreting context. Exercising judgement. Questioning assumptions. Creating meaning from complexity.

Global Insights: What are the common challenges for universities, and what leadership capabilities do they need now?

Alistair Jarvis CBE, Advance HE's Chief Executive, shares insights from an address to Ukrainian university leaders at a British Council event, reflecting on the pressures and leadership capabilities shaping higher education worldwide.



For years, higher education has often privileged specialisation above all else. Yet many organisations now place enormous value on people who can move between contexts, translate across disciplines and help others make sense of uncertainty.

What I have sometimes described - slightly informally - as the "generalist" within systems. The people who reduce friction. Who connect conversations. Who make progress possible when structures become complicated.

That capability does not emerge accidentally. It develops through exposure to different perspectives, through learning environments that tolerate uncertainty and through assessment approaches that value process, exploration and reflection alongside answers.

Again, this becomes a leadership question. Because leaders shape what institutions truly reward. Do our systems reward certainty more than curiosity? Compliance more than judgement? Performance more than learning? The answers to those questions increasingly shape the kinds of graduates institutions produce.

From provision to partnership

Another significant shift is happening around partnership and power. If institutions are serious about student success, then students cannot simply be positioned as recipients of education. They need to be recognised as contributors to how education is shaped.

That can sometimes sound abstract or idealistic, particularly in large institutions. In practice, however, the most effective examples are often quite practical. Students helping shape assessment briefs to improve relevance and clarity. Students contributing to module reviews where learning is not landing as intended. Students informing curriculum development through structured partnership approaches rather than solely through end-of-module surveys.

Some of the most useful examples are often relatively simple. First-year students redesigning induction based on what genuinely helped them transition. Final-year students helping shape employability pathways grounded in the realities they have just experienced.

This is not about handing over institutional control. It is about recognising student insight as a legitimate form of evidence alongside pedagogy, professional expertise and institutional data. And it requires a different leadership mindset. More open. More relational. More comfortable with shared ownership. Not because it sounds progressive, but because it generally leads to better decisions.





So what does this mean for new leaders?
If student success becomes the organising principle for higher education, then leadership itself starts to look different.
The role is no longer simply about managing functions or delivering isolated strategies. Increasingly, it is about navigating complexity, connecting systems and creating environments where people can succeed more consistently.
For new leaders entering the sector - and for many accidental leaders already operating within it - a few questions feel increasingly important:

What assumptions about "successful students" are we still carrying?

Where do our systems unintentionally create exclusion or friction?

How are we engaging with AI as a leadership and educational question, rather than solely a technical one?

Where does fragmentation exist within our institutions, and who experiences the consequences of it most sharply?

How confidently are we using different forms of evidence - not only data dashboards, but student insight, staff experience and professional judgement - to shape decisions?

Because ultimately, the future of higher education will not be defined by strategies alone. It will be shaped by leaders who can translate ambition into systems and values into practice. Leaders who are curious enough to keep questioning assumptions. Systems-aware enough to understand unintended consequences. Evidence-informed without becoming evidence-limited. And courageous enough to challenge inherited models, even when those models feel deeply embedded in institutional culture.

Most importantly, leaders who understand that student success is not another initiative competing for attention. It is one of the most powerful drivers institutions have for meaningful and sustained transformation. And the institutions that recognise that - and act on it coherently - are likely to be the ones that shape the next chapter of higher education.

Leading in an age of AI - why foresight has become an essential leadership capability for higher education

Professor Fehmida Hussain, PFHEA, Deputy Director at Middlesex University Dubai



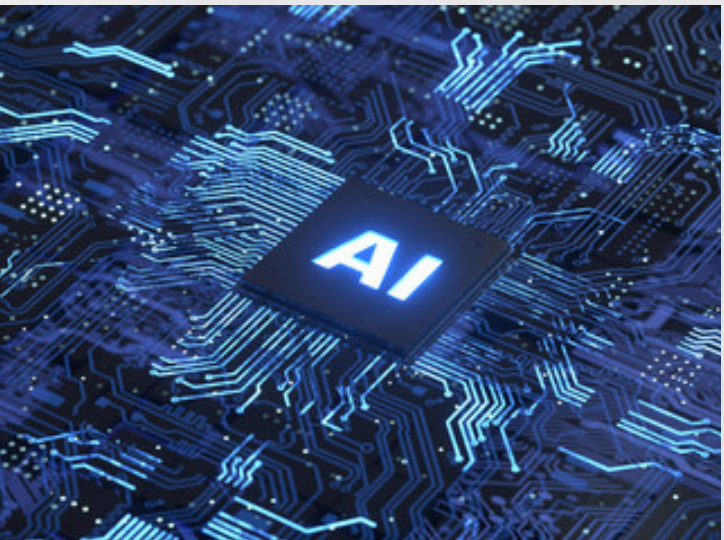
A strategic turning point

Receiving Principal Fellowship recently gave me an opportunity to pause and reflect on my leadership journey and, more importantly, on the future of higher education.

One question has increasingly occupied my thinking in recent years: how do we prepare students for futures that we cannot yet fully see? Throughout my career, spanning more than 30 years across the IT industry and academia, I have witnessed significant technological change. However, what feels different today is not simply the pace of change, but the level of uncertainty surrounding the future of work, skills, learning, and society itself.

Artificial intelligence is evolving rapidly. Skills that are highly relevant today may look very different within a few years. Student expectations continue to change, and universities are being asked to prepare graduates not only for employment, but also for a world that is becoming increasingly complex and unpredictable.

These realities have reinforced a belief that has become central to my leadership practice: future readiness is not simply a technology strategy. It is a leadership responsibility.



From managing change to leading with foresight

Like many leaders, I spent much of my early career focused on managing change.

We identified challenges, developed plans, implemented solutions and measured outcomes. While those approaches remain important, I have come to realise that many of the challenges facing higher education today cannot be addressed through traditional planning alone.

The challenge is no longer simply change. It is uncertainty. One of the things I have come to appreciate is that foresight is often misunderstood as predicting the future. In reality, it is about preparing for multiple possible futures and building the capacity to adapt as circumstances evolve.

This shift in thinking has influenced how I approach leadership. Rather than asking, "What will happen next?" I increasingly find myself asking, "How do we build institutions that can respond effectively regardless of what happens next?"

In a world shaped by AI, demographic shifts and rapidly changing workforce demands, universities need to be agile, adaptable and resilient. Increasingly, I believe they need leaders who are comfortable with uncertainty and willing to design for possibilities rather than wait for certainty.

One lesson I have learned over the years is that leadership is less about directing change and more about creating the conditions in which others can thrive, innovate and lead.

Building educational ecosystems, not initiatives

This thinking has shaped much of my work over the past decade. One of the most valuable lessons I have learned is that sustainable change rarely comes from isolated projects or short-term initiatives. It comes from building ecosystems where teaching, research, innovation, industry engagement and student experience are connected and reinforce one another.

Whether through establishing the Office of Student Research (OSR), creating the Middlesex Innovation Hub (MIH), or the Centre of Excellence for Foresight and Emerging Technologies (CEFET) at Middlesex University Dubai, my focus has never been on launching initiatives for their own sake. Instead, the aim has been to create environments where students and colleagues can continuously learn, collaborate, experiment and grow.

Through OSR, hundreds of students have engaged in research, presenting at conferences, publishing alongside staff and participating in national and international competitions. Through MIH, students have progressed from classroom ideas to prototypes, innovation challenges, entrepreneurial ventures and industry collaborations. Through CEFET, we are creating capacity-building opportunities in AI, emerging technologies, strategic foresight and responsible innovation, helping students, academics and external partners develop the capabilities needed to navigate uncertainty and contribute to future-focused societies.

Increasingly, students see themselves not only as learners, but as researchers, innovators, entrepreneurs and future leaders.

Leading institutions as resilient systems: reflections from the first 'Executives at the Leading Edge' session

Executives at the Leading Edge is an exclusive series of online events designed for executive leaders in higher education, featuring provocative keynote inputs from global thought leaders.

Perhaps the most meaningful change, however, has been cultural. Increasingly, students see themselves not only as learners, but as researchers, innovators, entrepreneurs and future leaders. Similarly, colleagues feel empowered to collaborate across disciplines, experiment with new ideas and contribute to institutional development. Looking back, I believe these shifts in mindset are far more important than any individual programme or initiative.





What the UAE has taught me about foresight

Having spent more than two decades living and working in Dubai, UAE, I have had the privilege of witnessing how long-term vision, coupled with a willingness to act boldly, can drive meaningful transformation.

Whether through investments in artificial intelligence, innovation ecosystems, entrepreneurship, digital transformation, or human capability development, the UAE has consistently demonstrated how foresight can be translated into action. Organisations such as the Dubai Future Foundation have played an important role in fostering future thinking and encouraging leaders to look beyond immediate challenges towards long-term opportunities.

This has influenced my own thinking about the role of higher education. Universities should not simply respond to change; they should help shape the future. They are not only providers of qualifications. They are institutions that contribute to national development, human capability, innovation and societal progress. In many ways, universities are part of the infrastructure that helps build future societies.

The human side of an AI future

As someone working in technology and education, I am often asked about the impact of AI on higher education. While much of the conversation focuses on technology, I believe the more important conversation is about people. As AI systems become more capable, human capabilities become even more important. Critical thinking, ethical judgement, creativity, empathy, leadership and the ability to navigate complexity will continue to distinguish successful graduates and professionals.

For this reason, universities must go beyond teaching students how to use AI tools. We must also help them understand the ethical, social and human implications of the technologies they will use, develop, and influence throughout their careers.

For me, the future of higher education is therefore not simply about adopting AI. It is about ensuring that technological advancement is accompanied by human development.

Looking ahead

Receiving Principal Fellowship has encouraged me to reflect on the journey so far, but it has also reinforced a sense of responsibility. The recognition is not an endpoint. Rather, it strengthens my commitment to contributing to conversations around the future of learning, responsible AI, innovation, leadership and student success, both within my institution and across the wider higher education sector.

If there is one lesson I have learned throughout my leadership journey, it is that future readiness does not happen by chance. It requires intentional leadership, a willingness to embrace uncertainty, and a commitment to continuously reimagine how we learn, teach and innovate.

We cannot predict the future. But we can design institutions that are ready for it. If foresight is becoming a core leadership capability, how can we embed it more intentionally within our institutions to prepare both our students and our universities for an increasingly uncertain future?

Leading for student success beyond the classroom

Professor Steven Warburton, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education Innovation), University of Newcastle, Australia



In my leadership experience across various institutions, there has been an increasing emphasis on delivering excellent teaching, enhancing graduate employability, strengthening a sense of belonging and equipping graduates with the necessary skills to navigate an uncertain future.

None of these priorities are new in isolation. However, it is essential to recognise that these factors demand a much broader understanding of what contemporary educational quality means. In my experience, the challenge lies in the fact that many of our leadership approaches were designed for a simpler definition of quality. However, if educational expectations are changing, then educational leadership needs to evolve too.

Quality is no longer created in one place

One lesson I have learned is that quality is rarely created in one place. Early in my career, I saw educational improvement as primarily about enhancing teaching. I still believe that excellent teaching is at the core of achieving quality outcomes, yet experience has demonstrated that students thrive when multiple systems, including curriculum, assessment, support services and digital spaces, are seamlessly integrated and functioning in harmony.



Students do not encounter these separately. They experience a connected journey, and a quality experience depends on how well these services work together. This means we have a shared institutional responsibility where no single committee or professional function holds ownership. As a leader, this has led to a shift in my conversations from improving individual parts to understanding how they work together as a functioning system.

Students are partners in quality

One of the most significant changes in my professional thinking has been my re-evaluation of students' role in educational quality. Students are not recipients of education or consumers of services. Instead, they are active participants in creating successful learning environments. In the current educational climate, a growing number of institutions are engaging students in a variety of activities, including curriculum review, assessment redesign, peer mentoring and educational enhancement.

These co-design approaches are producing better solutions as they tap into perspectives that institutions are unable to generate independently. When students become genuine partners in the learning process, we gain richer insights into how learning is experienced rather than how it was intended. This frequently results in tangible benefits to both current and future cohorts. In my case, this has meant reframing the question. Rather than asking how students can contribute to my initiatives, I now ask how I can design educational practice with students from the outset.

Leadership is becoming more connective

Over time, I've become convinced that leadership is fundamentally about creating connection. Most universities already have strategies in place for employability, student partnership, inclusion, wellbeing and digital education. The issue is rarely a lack of good ideas. It is helping those ambitions reinforce one another. Leadership, therefore, becomes about creating coherence. What capabilities does this require to succeed?

This necessitates leaders who are comfortable working across organisational boundaries and who can bring together academic and professional colleagues around shared outcomes. It is essential to cultivate environments where experimentation is encouraged, evidence informs decision-making, and improvement is a collective responsibility.

Doing less, but doing it together

None of this is happening in an environment of unlimited resources. All universities are making difficult decisions as they adapt to changing student expectations, dealing with financial pressures and increasing public scrutiny. One lesson I've learned is that success rarely comes from adding another project. The key to success often lies in aligning existing ones around a shared institutional purpose. Those institutions making the greatest progress are often those that simplify processes, collaborate and empower others to contribute. This approach fosters sustainable improvement based on collective ownership. In many cases, supported by a more robust connection between people, policies and practice.

Looking ahead

Quality in higher education has expanded beyond what happens in our teaching spaces to encompass the whole student experience and the outcomes students achieve long after graduation. This calls for a broader model of educational leadership. If my own thinking about educational quality has changed over the years, it is this. I no longer see quality primarily as something we assure. I see it as something we intentionally design, continually improve and create together.

One leadership idea that has increasingly resonated with my own practice comes from Geoff Scott's simple sequence: Listen. Link. Leverage. Lead. Rather than beginning with another initiative, it encourages us to start by understanding. Have we listened carefully enough? Have we linked the right people and ideas? Are we leveraging the strengths we already possess? Only then should we ask how we lead meaningful educational change.





The art of leading a university like a world-class orchestra

Sustainable excellence is not created by buildings, policies or sophisticated systems. It is created by people.

Dr Rana Sawaya Zeitounie, President, University College of Bahrain



A world-class orchestra is not defined by the grandeur of its concert hall. Its excellence lies in every musician's commitment to mastering their craft, listening carefully to one another, and performing with a shared sense of purpose. Each musician brings exceptional talent, yet the beauty of the performance depends on how well those talents are harmonized toward a common vision.

Universities are no different. Higher education institutions invest heavily in infrastructure, technology, digital transformation and strategic planning. Yet sustainable excellence is not created by buildings, policies or sophisticated systems. It is created by people. Faculty and professional staff transform institutional strategy into meaningful learning experiences, impactful research and genuine community engagement.

The challenge facing university leaders today is therefore not simply to develop a strategy, but to create an environment where people are empowered to perform at their very best. As Peter Drucker (2006) reminds us, culture ultimately determines whether strategy succeeds.

As universities navigate rapid technological change, artificial intelligence, shifting student expectations, financial pressures and increasing accountability, leadership has become more important than ever. Strategic plans alone are no longer sufficient. Like a piece of music, a strategy only comes alive when talented people interpret it with commitment, creativity and purpose.

One of the most important lessons I have learned as President of the University College of Bahrain (UCB) is that excellence cannot be imposed, it must be cultivated. A conductor cannot produce magnificent music by playing every instrument. Instead, the conductor creates conditions that allow every musician to perform at their highest level while remaining aligned with the orchestra. University leadership is no different. Excellence grows when people feel trusted, recognized and inspired to contribute beyond what is expected.

Before embarking on any institutional transformation, leaders should pause to ask a simple but powerful question: what truly distinguishes our university? Every renowned orchestra develops its own distinctive sound while remaining faithful to the composer's vision. Likewise, universities must understand their unique strengths before attempting change.

Transformation should never consist of disconnected initiatives. Rather, every initiative, from redefining graduate attributes and strengthening faculty leadership, to expanding community partnerships and aligning institutional priorities with stakeholder expectations, should represent another carefully rehearsed movement in the university's symphony. When every initiative supports the same institutional vision, change becomes coherent and sustainable.



As universities navigate rapid technological change, artificial intelligence, shifting student expectations, financial pressures and increasing accountability, leadership has become more important than ever.

Faculty empowerment is perhaps the most crucial responsibility of university leaders. In every orchestra, the quality of the performance ultimately depends not on the conductor but on the musicians. Likewise, faculty members are the principal performers in higher education, translating institutional ambitions into transformational learning experiences. If we want students to flourish, we must first invest in those who teach, mentor and inspire them. Research consistently shows that empowered faculty demonstrate greater engagement, commitment and teaching effectiveness (Bland et al., 2005).

At UCB, one initiative that had a particularly meaningful impact was introducing an annual faculty recognition event celebrating excellence in teaching, research, academic advising, innovation and community engagement. What made the initiative especially powerful was that nominations came directly from students. In an orchestra, applause from the audience is the ultimate affirmation that the performance has touched lives.

Likewise, student recognition reminds faculty that their greatest achievements are measured not only by publications or promotions, but by the positive impact they have on their students. Recognition therefore became more than an awards ceremony; it became a celebration of the culture we aspired to build.



Recognition, however, is only one movement in the performance. Great orchestras continue rehearsing long after the applause has faded because excellence is never a destination. In the same way, universities must continually invest in professional growth. At UCB, we made a strategic commitment to support all academic staff in pursuing Advance HE Fellowship while expanding professional development opportunities aligned with individual aspirations, annual performance reviews and institutional priorities. Just as accomplished musicians continually refine their technique, educators must remain lifelong learners, continuously enhancing their teaching and leadership.

Another hallmark of a successful orchestra is collaboration. Strings, brass and percussion each contribute something unique, yet none can succeed in isolation. Their strength lies in listening to one another and performing as one ensemble. Universities face a similar challenge. Artificial intelligence, sustainability, graduate employability and interdisciplinary research cannot be addressed within departmental silos. Innovation emerges when different disciplines perform in harmony.

Leaders therefore have a responsibility to build structures that encourage collaboration rather than competition.

Cross-functional projects, interdisciplinary initiatives and institution-wide committees resemble orchestral rehearsals where different sections learn not only to master their own parts but also to appreciate how they contribute to the entire performance. When colleagues see themselves as members of one institutional orchestra, collaboration becomes a source of innovation rather than an administrative requirement.

Continuous improvement represents another essential rehearsal in the journey towards excellence. Professional orchestras rehearse not because they are failing but because refinement is part of their identity. Universities should approach quality in the same way. Too often, quality assurance is viewed solely through the lens of compliance and accreditation. However, sustainable quality cultures emerge when improvement becomes embedded in everyday practice rather than remaining the responsibility of quality offices. Like every musician taking responsibility for the overall performance, not merely their own instrument, faculty, professional staff, students and leaders must all contribute to improving the institution.





Leading from lived experience
Misbha Khanum, Equality Lead at Swansea University, reflects on her experience of Advance HE's Diversifying Leadership programme.

Finally, innovation flourishes in environments built on trust. The most memorable musical performances rarely emerge from rigid control but from confidence, creativity and psychological safety. Likewise, innovation in universities seldom results from directives issued by senior management. It grows when people feel safe to experiment, collaborate, share ideas and learn from setbacks.

Edmondson (2019) identifies psychological safety as one of the strongest predictors of organizational learning and innovation because it encourages people to contribute without fear of failure.

The universities that will thrive in the years ahead will not necessarily be those with the largest campuses or the newest technologies. They will be the institutions that invest most intentionally in their people.

When we recognize excellence, empower faculty, foster collaboration, embrace continuous improvement and create the conditions for innovation, strategy becomes more than a document; it becomes a performance. Like a world-class orchestra, every individual contributes to something far greater than themselves, creating institutions that not only educate students but also inspire communities and shape the future.

Why higher education needs intentional serendipity



Valarie Williams-Foy, Head of Leadership Development & Lead for the Imperial Leadership Academy

Higher education doesn't have a leadership problem - it has a complexity problem. There are many challenges in higher education today that cannot be fixed through better management, more technical expertise, or ever more sophisticated strategic plans. They need something else.

Universities have always operated within complex systems but the challenges universities face today are quite different. Volatile international recruitment, changing immigration policies, increased expectations from students and staff, climate change, lifelong learning, flexible credentials, demographic shifts and fragile business models combine to create an environment where certainty is the exception rather than the rule.

According to Heifetz et al (2009), they are adaptive challenges - issues for which there are no known solutions since the problem keeps evolving. Responding to them requires much more than expertise; it involves relationships, collective action, experimentation, pattern recognition and sense-making. The age of the heroic leader - the person with all the answers - is gone. We need leaders who can mobilise others, build relationships and connections, and create the conditions for better answers to come forth.

The development of leadership in higher education has largely concentrated on building the competencies of a sector that was once more stable and predictable. While these capabilities are still valuable, they are not enough.

Leadership development needs to shift focus to vertical development - developing the leaders' capacity to think systemically, hold multiple perspectives, ask good questions and lead through uncertainty. Leaders today cannot diagnose and fix everything alone. These challenges require different people to contribute differently, more cooperation across organisational boundaries, and the willingness to experiment. Instead of striving for the perfect first-time performance, organisations need to experiment, learn, adapt and remain open to opportunities that may emerge unexpectedly.

Here comes the concept of intentional serendipity to help. According Busch (2022), serendipity is not just luck. It is born out of the combination of agency, surprise and value - our capacity to recognise and act upon unexpected opportunities that generate desirable outcomes.

Instead of leaving it up to chance encounters, Busch (2022) says we can foster serendipity by orchestrating the interactions of unexpected moments, organisational enablers and individual behaviours. Prior knowledge, observations and experience certainly count but so does building organisational environments where the possibility of unexpected connections and ideation increases.



Flexibility becomes a strategic capability in uncertain times. By Busch's (2022) account, organisations need to shift from rigid structures to flexible environments where people can adapt and collaborate when needed. Such organisational environments are the best places where unexpected discoveries and innovative solutions can occur.

This represents a huge shift in higher education. It transforms the leadership challenge from "How do we solve increasingly complex problems?" into, "How do we build environments where unexpected collaborations, fresh perspectives, and innovative ideas can emerge?"

The solution to this question is moving away from silos that still characterise many of our institutions.

According to Heifetz et al (2009), adaptive leadership is about mobilising people to solve hard challenges and creating the conditions under which they can adapt and thrive. Adaptive leadership is not so much about providing solutions as it is about increasing organisational capacity for renewal and learning. Our universities have to become learning organisations - not just knowledge producing institutions but institutions that are continually learning how to respond to complexity.



Effective leadership is underpinned by organisational systems design. The goal is not collaboration for collaboration's sake but creating the conditions for intentional serendipity - where fresh connections lead to innovative responses to the challenges like AI, curriculum design, student experience, research and supporting the academic mission.

One way of doing this is designing cross-institutional leadership programmes that would purposefully bring together colleagues from various departments, both academic and non-academic. Through designing opportunities for diverse perspectives to interact, such programmes create the conditions for unexpected conversations that lead to innovative ideas and disrupt existing mental models. We need to create cross boundary networks.

Intentional serendipity requires a very different kind of leadership mindset. Universities have traditionally valued expertise and certainty. Yet adaptive challenges demand curiosity as a leadership capability.

We need leaders who constantly ask: Whose perspective is missing? What assumptions are we making? Who have we not yet engaged? This creates a culture where exploration and experimentation are equally valued with execution.

This raises some important implications for those of us lucky enough to be developing the next generation of university leaders. Leadership development cannot be focused anymore on developing competent individuals alone. Our job is to help our leaders cultivate organisational conditions in which serendipity thrives.



Perhaps it is not so much about producing heroic leaders but helping them to become gardeners who will prepare the proper soil, give sunlight and water to ideas, relationships and opportunities. The future of higher education is not about individual capability alone but about the strength of the leadership ecosystem we cultivate.

If it is true, it means that we need to redefine what metrics to use.

If we are serious about cultivating intentional serendipity, we need to pay attention to the leading indicators of future adaptability: strength of cross-disciplinary collaborations, diversity of organisational networks, depth of relationships, quality of external partnerships and frequency of emergence of new ideas from unexpected connections. No longer are these 'soft' metrics; these are signs of organisational health, adaptive capability and sustainability.

Universities that will prosper in the future may not be the ones with the most detailed strategy or the most competent individual leaders. They will be those universities whose leaders purposefully design environments where diverse perspectives connect, experiments are encouraged, and answers are found collectively.

If leadership is no longer about having answers, maybe the next frontier of leadership development is not developing better leaders but developing leaders who know how to create the conditions where better answers will emerge.

Leadership and community cohesion
David Bass introduces a thought leadership series that brings together contributions from three influential senior figures across the UK higher education sector, curated by Advance HE, in response to the depth and intensity of conversations on inclusion, free speech and community cohesion.

What universities are for in the age of AI

Laura Maska, PFHEA, Managing Director of Aegean College, Greece



Generative AI is forcing higher education to confront a deeper question than assessment or academic integrity: what should universities cultivate in humans when knowledge-like outputs are no longer uniquely human?

Higher education is entering a phase in which its traditional advantage - the organised production, validation and certification of knowledge - is no longer enough. Generative artificial intelligence is not simply another educational technology. It is a redistribution of cognitive work. Universities are right to focus on assessment, academic integrity and AI literacy. But those are only first responses. The deeper question is harder, and more important: what must higher education cultivate in humans when intelligence itself is no longer exclusively human? [1–6]

For decades, higher education has operated on an implicit compact. Universities have equipped students with specialised knowledge, specialist expertise and signals of competence that carry economic and social value. That implicit compact is now under increasing pressure. AI systems can already draft, code, summarise, translate, simulate dialogue and generate plausible interpretations across many domains. This does not make universities obsolete. It does mean, however, that the value of higher education can no longer rest primarily on the transmission of information or the production of first-pass outputs. The point of university education must shift from possession of answers to the disciplined exercise of judgement. [1,3,6]

From answers to judgement

This is why the central educational challenge is no longer knowledge acquisition alone, but cognitive integration: learning how to think with intelligent systems without surrendering thought to them. Students now work inside hybrid cognitive environments in which prompts, models, data, interpretation and human judgement interact. The key question is not whether AI helps them produce more, but whether it helps them understand more. That depends on capacities universities have too often treated as secondary: problem framing, epistemic awareness, critical evaluation, ethical reasoning and the ability to decide when AI should not be used. [1–4]

Seen in this light, the real risk is not only plagiarism or overreliance. It is stratified learning. AI tools may be broadly available, but the ability to use them well is not evenly distributed. Some students are already learning to use AI as a cognitive partner - testing ideas, refining questions, checking assumptions and accelerating complex work. Others use it only at the margins, for convenience or surface support, or avoid it altogether because expectations remain unclear.

The new divide is therefore not simply between access and non-access. It is between students who can convert AI into intellectual leverage and students who cannot. Left unmanaged, AI will not democratise higher education; it will deepen differences in confidence, guidance and disciplinary fit. [2,3,6]



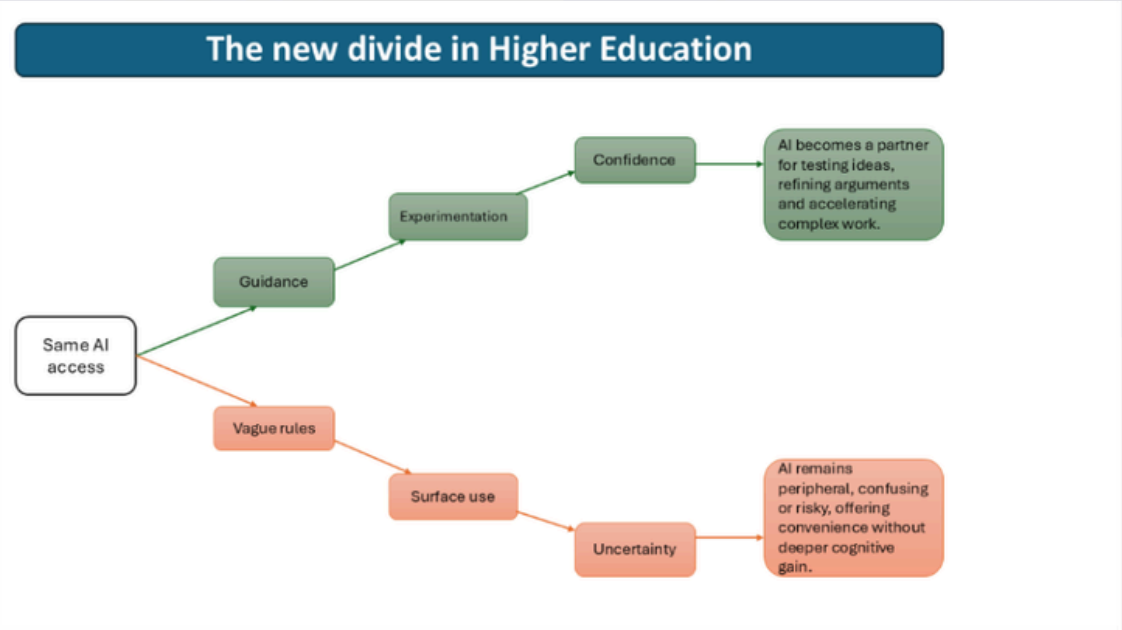


Figure 1: The new divide in Higher Education – The next inequality in higher education may be less about access to AI than about the ability to turn it into intellectual leverage.

Why generic AI literacy is too thin

This is why generic calls for "AI literacy" are too thin. AI is not used in the same way across disciplines, nor should it be. Engineering, law, design, psychology, business, medicine and the humanities differ in what counts as evidence, rigour, authorship and responsible judgement.

A meaningful institutional response must therefore be discipline-sensitive. In some fields, students may need to learn how to integrate AI into modelling, prototyping or analytical workflows. In others, they may need stronger emphasis on interpretation, ethics, relational responsibility, voice, uncertainty and contextual judgement. The issue is not whether every student should use AI in the same way, but whether every programme is clear about what good judgement looks like in an AI-present environment. [1,2,4,5]

Equally important is the developmental dimension. Students do not arrive with uniform levels of readiness, and AI-related capabilities must be scaffolded over time. Early exposure may focus on basic understanding and ethical awareness, while later stages can emphasise critical evaluation, iterative use and integration into complex tasks. What institutions need, then, is not a generic AI bolt-on, but a staged approach to capability-building that links pedagogy, assessment and disciplinary purpose.



HE leadership in the UK and Germany: cross-cultural reflections from TMP

Following the Top Management Programme international week in Berlin, Klaus-Dieter Rossade shares personal reflections on cross-cultural differences and common themes in higher education.

Assessment after first drafts

Assessment sits at the centre of this shift. Traditional assessment assumes that a finished product can stand as a reasonable proxy for individual learning. AI makes that assumption increasingly fragile. The answer is not a retreat into prohibition, nor a permanent arms race of detection. It is assessment redesign. Universities will need tasks that make thinking more visible: iterative drafting, oral defence, studio critique, reflective commentary, authentic application, collaborative inquiry and evidence of decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. The aim should not be to eliminate AI from academic work, but to ensure that its use remains intellectually accountable and educationally meaningful. Advance HE's own conversation has been moving in precisely this direction: beyond detection, and beyond assessment understood narrowly. [4,5]

This has implications not only for pedagogy, but for institutional purpose. For too long, higher education policy has allowed "skills" and "employability" to become overly narrow organising terms.

A moment of choice

The real danger is not that AI will change higher education too much. It is that higher education will respond too timidly - layering AI on top of existing structures without rethinking what those structures are for. Institutions now face a genuine choice. They can treat AI as a compliance problem at the margins of the system. Or they can use it as a catalyst to clarify their educational purpose. The future of higher education will not be decided by whether students use AI. It will be decided by whether universities can create the conditions under which that use becomes thoughtful, equitable and aligned with the deeper purposes of education.

The urgent question for higher education is no longer whether machines can generate knowledge-like outputs, but what universities must cultivate in humans when those outputs are no longer enough.

The references in this blog are included in full where the blog was originally published

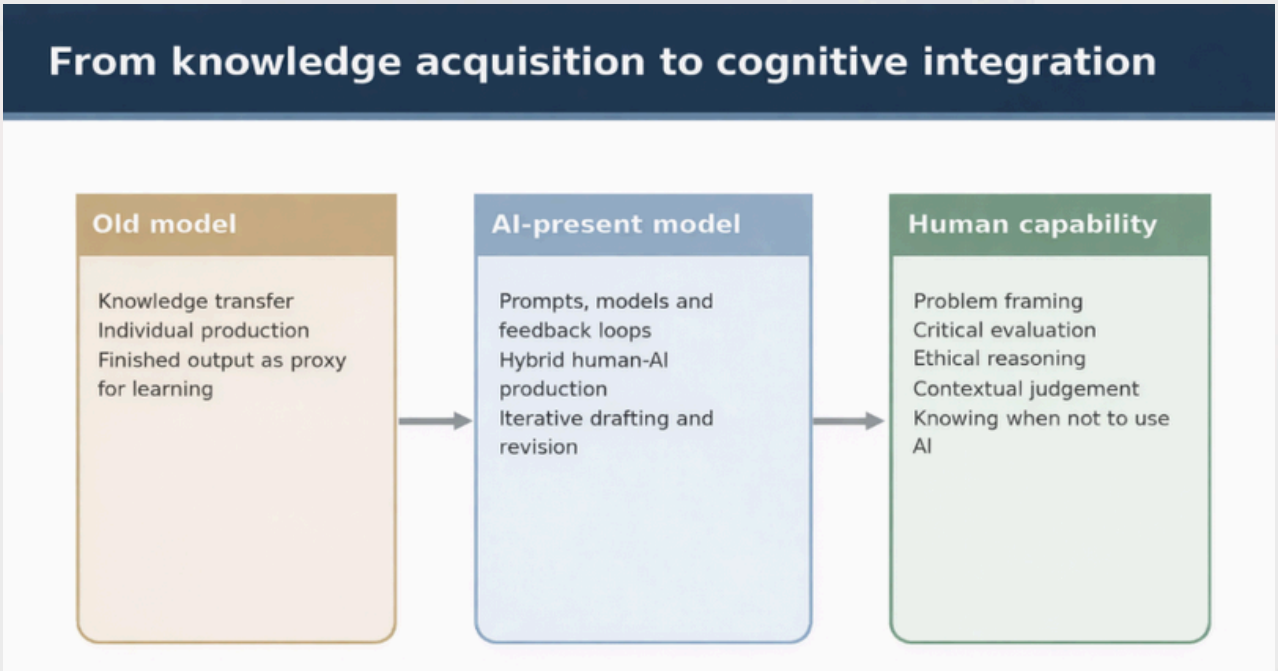


Figure 2. From knowledge acquisition to cognitive integration: The educational shift is not from learning to non-learning, but from answer production to accountable collaboration with intelligent systems.

Aurora: 'rethinking what leadership means to me'

Mary Keeler Kenyon, Student Conduct, Complaints and Discipline Manager at Aberystwyth University shares her experience of Aurora, Advance HE's leadership development initiative for women in higher education.

For years, higher education has often privileged specialisation above all else. Yet many organisations now place enormous value on people who can move between contexts, translate across disciplines and help others make sense of uncertainty.

What I have sometimes described - slightly informally - as the "generalist" within systems. The people who reduce friction. Who connect conversations. Who make progress possible when structures become complicated.

That capability does not emerge accidentally. It develops through exposure to different perspectives, through learning environments that tolerate uncertainty and through assessment approaches that value process, exploration and reflection alongside answers.

Again, this becomes a leadership question. Because leaders shape what institutions truly reward. Do our systems reward certainty more than curiosity? Compliance more than judgement? Performance more than learning? The answers to those questions increasingly shape the kinds of graduates institutions produce.

From provision to partnership

Another significant shift is happening around partnership and power. If institutions are serious about student success, then students cannot simply be positioned as recipients of education. They need to be recognised as contributors to how education is shaped.

That can sometimes sound abstract or idealistic, particularly in large institutions. In practice, however, the most effective examples are often quite practical. Students helping shape assessment briefs to improve relevance and clarity. Students contributing to module reviews where learning is not landing as intended. Students informing curriculum development through structured partnership approaches rather than solely through end-of-module surveys.

Some of the most useful examples are often relatively simple. First-year students redesigning induction based on what genuinely helped them transition. Final-year students helping shape employability pathways grounded in the realities they have just experienced.

This is not about handing over institutional control. It is about recognising student insight as a legitimate form of evidence alongside pedagogy, professional expertise and institutional data. And it requires a different leadership mindset. More open. More relational. More comfortable with shared ownership. Not because it sounds progressive, but because it generally leads to better decisions.



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