IREX

DEVELOPMENT GATEWAY
An IREX Venture

FROM AMBITION TO ADOPTION :

Insights into University AI Readiness from Around the World

AUTHORS

Razan Elayan
Mariam Ibrahim
Cameron Mirza
Tom Orrell

MAY 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We, the authors, Razan Elayan, Mariam Ibrahim, Cameron Mirza, and Tom Orrell, would like to thank all those who contributed to the development of this report. Special recognition goes to Razan Elayan for their work in developing the maturity model and index that were used to analyze data. We are also grateful to Josh Powell, Rebecca Bell, Jill Miller, and James Mahoney for their contributions and review throughout the research and drafting process.

We thank Breeze Hu for the graphic design and Wakini Njogu for copy editing. Our appreciation also goes to Dr Yara Shaban and Dr Malak Hamdan who provided valuable feedback and guidance on earlier drafts.

Special thanks are extended to Maryam Rabiee at SDGs Today for her strategic guidance, and to the leadership teams at Development Gateway: An IREX Venture (DG) and IREX for their support throughout the project.

ABOUT IREX

IREX partners with communities and institutions worldwide to cultivate leaders, create employment opportunities, and expand access to education, delivering measurable, cost-effective results. Based in the United States with regional global offices, IREX has been committed to creating value for individuals and communities through practical, enduring impact for nearly 60 years. IREX implements solutions enabling people to thrive in a technology-, AI-, and data-driven world, gaining opportunities to make better choices to drive innovation and outcomes.

For more information, visit https://irex.org.

ABOUT DEVELOPMENT GATEWAY: AN IREX VENTURE

Development Gateway: An IREX Venture (DG) builds resilient data and digital solutions for international development. With over two decades of experience, DG drives digital transformation, innovation, and digital governance by partnering with governments, NGOs, the private sector, academia, philanthropies, and multilateral institutions to design and implement context-driven, innovative digital solutions.

For more information, visit https://developmentgateway.org.

CONTACT US

If you would like to know more about the AI readiness assessment or have a conversation about AI in higher education, please contact:

Cameron Mirza:
cmirza@irex.org

Tom Orrell:
torrell@developmentgateway.org

For press related matters, please contact:

James Mahoney:
jmahoney@irex.org

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Universities around the world are innovating with artificial intelligence (AI) in areas such as teaching, research and operational administration. This report presents research aimed specifically at understanding the current state of AI integration within universities. The research indicates that the institutional foundations needed to turn AI adoption into university, and education system-wide value are still catching up with leadership ambition.

In this report, we draw on 76 individual responses across 25 countries to a global survey that IREX and Development Gateway: An IREX Venture (DG) shared over a three-month period (November 2025 – January 2026) in partnership with the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (UNSDSN). Responses came from individuals working across functions - as university leaders, faculty, and administrators – and as such do not necessarily represent the formal institutional views but rather provide insights into how ordinary university staff view AI. Findings are derived from an analysis based on an AI readiness index and maturity model that we developed.

Responses were largely concentrated in Africa and the Middle East where youth populations are large, and higher education systems are expanding rapidly. These are precisely the contexts where AI-enabled higher education will shape workforce readiness, social mobility, and the capacity of states to deliver on their digital transformation strategies in future.

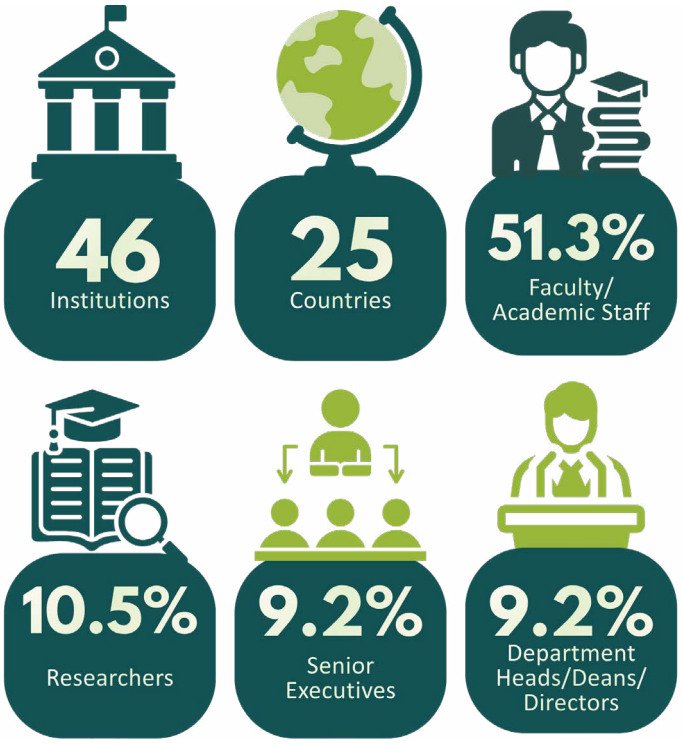

Figure 1: Global self-assessment respondents

Insights

At IREX and DG we define AI readiness as the extent to which universities are able to leverage AI tools to systematically, sustainably and ethically improve teaching and learning experiences, research, and strategic and operational outcomes. The analysis presented in this report shows that while AI adoption is widespread at the user level, there is uneven progress in the development of the institutional foundations needed for safe, scalable AI integration that creates institutional value. Only around a third of respondents report a clear AI strategy, and fewer than one in five describe appropriately governed pilots integrated into core workflows. In practice this means while individuals (leadership, students, and staff) are evolving, higher education institutions are not equipped to channel this momentum into safe, scalable high impact.

Institutional Readiness Is Trailing Leadership Ambition

- **Key data**

Survey data indicate a gap in policy and governance, with only 34.2% of respondents reporting that their institution has a clear AI strategy linked to academic and operational priorities, and 39.5% reporting approved AI-related policies. A similarly low proportion report active senior leadership engagement in AI initiatives and where it does exist, it has largely not yet been fully translated into coherent strategies and rules of the game. Operational integration also remains limited - just under a fifth of respondents report governed pilots or deployments integrated into workflows, and only a similar proportion report systematic efforts to measure AI's impact. While budget lines for AI are beginning to emerge, they remain inconsistent and weakly connected to institutional priorities.

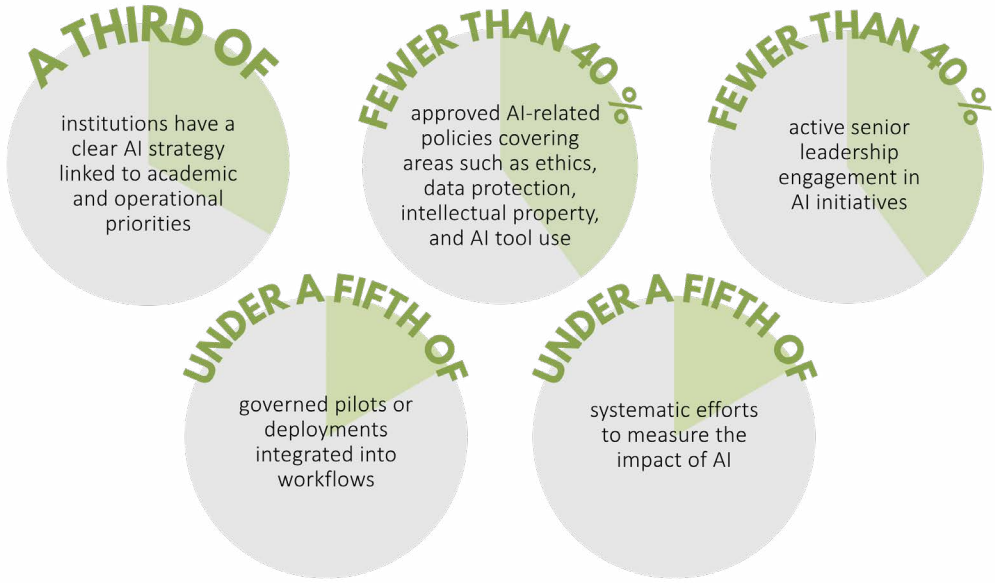

Figure 2: Summary of key insights

- **Analysis and why it matters**

Our analysis suggests that institutional systems are not keeping pace with the speed of AI uptake at the user level. Universities are experiencing strong demand and experimentation across teaching and learning, but lack the governance frameworks, strategic alignment, and operational structures needed to translate this into sustained and equitable value. Universities therefore face a dual risk:

1. Without coherent AI strategies, governance frameworks and targeted capability building, institutions are exposed to fragmented and unstructured adoption, misaligned pilots, and inefficient use of limited resources.

2. Institutional inertia means that universities risk being unable to prepare students adequately for the expectations and needs of employers who increasingly require a highly AI-literate workforce.

Thus, AI becomes both a governance challenge and a strategic opportunity to modernize teaching, research and operations.

Governance And Policy: Foundations That Remain Incomplete

- **Key data**

Survey data indicate that governance and policy foundations for AI remain underdeveloped across institutions.

1. A large majority of respondents report that an AI strategy is either not in place, not clearly visible to them, or only partially developed.

2. Fewer than 40% confirm that approved AI policies are in place.

3. Questions on leadership engagement return the highest "don't know" rates in this domain, underlining a communication and visibility gap across wider institutions.

Our recommendations in this area focus on integrating AI strategies and policies into a unified governance framework; institutionalizing leadership engagement that it is visible, understood, and accountable; and, ensuring that the development of an AI strategy becomes an explicit institutional priority. Without a coherent strategy and policy framework, universities will struggle to move beyond isolated experimentation and will be poorly positioned to manage the risks associated with AI.

- **Analysis and why it matters**

Our analysis suggests that even where elements of governance exist, they are fragmented, inconsistently communicated, or not institutionalized. The lack of clear strategies and policies limits institutions' ability to coordinate AI adoption, manage risks, and provide direction to staff and students.

Gaps in leadership visibility further reinforce this challenge, indicating that governance is not yet embedded as an institution-wide priority. Without coherent and well-communicated frameworks, universities are likely to remain in a state of fragmented adoption, with limited capacity to scale AI responsibly or align initiatives with broader institutional goals.

Workforce Capability And Skills: Emerging But Misaligned

- **Key data**

Survey data point to a generally supportive environment for AI adoption. Roughly two-thirds of respondents describe cultures that at least partially encourage safe experimentation and innovation, and a similar proportion report some form of ongoing training or professional development.

ROUGHLY TWO-THIRDS

describe cultures that at least partially encourage safe experimentation and innovation

ROUGHLY TWO-THIRDS

report some form of ongoing training or professional development

However, responses also show that this support is not systematic. Mapping AI skills and training needs across roles remains patchy, and a significant proportion of respondents who have received AI training report that this training is not mapped to role-specific needs, or that they are unaware of such mapping.

- **Analysis and why it matters**

Our analysis suggests that while institutions are fostering a culture of enthusiastic experimentation, they are not yet translating this into structured capability development. The absence of clear skills frameworks and role-based training pathways limits the effectiveness of capacity-building efforts and reduces the potential for sustained and scalable adoption.

As a result, institutions risk developing pockets of informal expertise without building the coordinated, organization-wide capabilities needed to integrate AI into teaching, research, and operations in a meaningful and sustainable way.

Operational Integration: Still At An Emerging Stage

- **Key data**

Survey data indicate that operational integration of AI remains limited across institutions. Only a minority of respondents report active AI pilots or deployments with appropriate oversight, while a large majority describe such initiatives as either partial or absent.

Progress in defining and prioritizing AI use cases is also limited, with most respondents indicating that this is only partially established or not yet in place. While nearly half report that dedicated AI funding is either fully established or partially in place, this funding is often not clearly linked to prioritized use cases or robust measurement frameworks.

First, movement from planning to implementation remains uneven.

Second, progress in defining and prioritizing AI use cases is limited, with most respondents indicating only partial or no identification of priority use cases.

Third, while nearly half of respondents report that dedicated AI funding is either fully established or partially in place.

- **Analysis and why it matters**

Our analysis suggests that institutions are struggling to move from early-stage exploration to structured implementation. The absence of clearly defined use cases limits the ability to focus resources and align efforts, while weak links between funding, implementation, and impact measurement reduce the effectiveness of investments.

As a result, AI adoption risks remaining at the level of isolated initiatives rather than becoming embedded in core institutional processes. Without stronger alignment between priorities, funding, and execution, universities may find it difficult to scale AI in ways that deliver measurable value.

Key Recommendations

We see three interconnected audiences for action: universities, governments, and donors or funders. In each case, the priority is to move from ad hoc experimentation toward systematic, ethical, and scalable AI integration that delivers measurable value.

For Universities

Universities need to treat AI not as a series of disconnected tools, but as a strategic capability that cuts across teaching, research, and operations. This requires:

- **Establishing coherent AI governance** developing or updating institution-wide AI strategies; integrating AI into existing strategic plans; and putting in place clear policies, risk registers, and procurement guidelines that cover ethics, data protection, intellectual property, and tool use. This should be done alongside ensuring visible and accountable leadership ownership so governance is understood and operationalized across the institution.
- **Building role-aligned capability** creating AI skills frameworks for faculty, researchers, student support and operational staff; offering structured, role-based professional development; and institutionalizing safe spaces for experimentation such as sandbox environments.
- **Integrating AI into curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment** redesigning curricula to embed AI literacy and responsible use across disciplines; equipping faculty to incorporate AI into teaching and learning through updated pedagogical approaches; and, rethinking assessment practices to ensure academic integrity while leveraging AI for deeper, more authentic learning, particularly in response to risks associated with AI generated content and limitations in current detection approaches.
- **Moving from pilots to integration** identifying and prioritizing high-value AI use cases, designing governed pilots with clear outcome metrics, strengthening underlying digital infrastructure, and introducing systematic approaches to measuring AI's impact on student outcomes, research productivity; and, improving institutional efficiency and ensuring that funding, implementation, and impact measurement are explicitly linked to avoid fragmented or low-impact investments.

For Governments

Ministries and education authorities can create the enabling conditions that allow institutions to advance beyond isolated pockets of innovation. Key priorities include:

- **Setting system-wide standards** publishing clear policy frameworks for AI in higher education (covering ethics, quality assurance, data protection, procurement, and academic integrity); and developing national or regional AI skills frameworks that embed AI literacy, responsible use, and ethics into accreditation and quality assurance standards for both faculty and students
- **Investing in shared infrastructure and capacity** financing secure digital infrastructure, data governance systems, and shared platforms that lower barriers for institutions, particularly those that are under-resourced; and, supporting leadership development, faculty training, and modernization of quality assurance systems to reflect AI-enabled teaching and assessment.

- **Facilitating collaboration and accountability** encouraging inter-university consortia for shared infrastructure, procurement, and benchmarking; and, aligning public funding and incentives with outcomes such as quality, and employability linked to responsible AI adoption.

For Funders

Funders have an opportunity to play a catalytic role by backing the institutional and system-level foundations that individual universities cannot easily build alone. We see three main lines of action:

- **Shifting from tools to readiness** prioritizing multi-year investments that strengthen governance, skills, measurement, and infrastructure for AI in higher education, rather than one-off pilots or narrow technology deployments.
- **Enabling evidence and learning at scale** supporting AI readiness assessments and institutional learning on the value of AI; supporting benchmarking dashboards and regional learning networks; and requiring robust impact measurement so that lessons extend beyond individual projects.
- **Advancing equity and public value** targeting resources toward under-resourced institutions and regions; supporting policy and quality assurance reforms that protect rights and academic integrity; and ensuring that AI investments are explicitly tied to improvements in learning outcomes, and employability, rather than to technology adoption alone with clearer links to system level outcomes.

1 Introduction

What is AI readiness and why is it relevant for universities in 2026?

At IREX and DG, we define AI readiness as the extent to which universities, are able to leverage AI tools to systematically, sustainably and ethically improve teaching and learning experiences, research, and strategic and operational outcomes.

We believe that as universities start to experiment with AI tools, it is essential that in parallel they work to establish organizational and technical foundations that will enable them to move beyond testing and experimentation and towards the systematic, sustainable and ethical integration of AI tools.

When adopted within an appropriately prepared educational institution, AI has the potential to turbocharge learning, personalize educational experiences, and improve operational efficiency within teaching institutions. This is evident from how technology is already impacting university and student behavior and the ambitions that universities have to adopt the technology. Harvard Business School, for instance, provides all MBA students with a ChatGPT Edu account and has launched an MBA course designed specifically to help business leaders navigate AI-powered tools. The course comes with custom-built AI chatbots that operate as automated tutors (Criddle and Jack 2025). AI is also adding significant value to universities' operations. The Illinois Institute of Technology, for instance, was able to streamline student applicant transcript processing from a 4–6 week manual exercise to an automated one that took just a few hours, saving weeks' worth of staff time and cost (Baute 2025).

However, despite examples of innovation, current evidence suggests that universities are lagging in AI adoption. According to Coursera AI's Higher Education Report (the Coursera report), while 95% of students and educators use AI tools, only 26% report that their institution has formal AI policies, highlighting a gap between adoption and preparedness in higher education (Coursera 2026). As our experience suggests, and the insights in this report corroborate, AI's potential in university settings is often limited by a combination of organizational and technical challenges. Organizationally, a lack of capacity and skills, cultural and behavioral practices and deficient institutional oversight and stewardship of how data and digital tools are used to add value create barriers to systemic and sustainable AI use in educational settings. At a technical level, the use of legacy data systems that limit data interoperability and integration, messy middleware layers and unstructured records and databases limit AI-readiness. Cutting

across both organizational and technical barriers are trust, governance and communication issues that hinder universities' ability to prepare themselves for a future in which AI tools will be used as routinely by all staff and students as internet search-engines and social media platforms are today.

Beyond these institution-level barriers to AI readiness, there are also policy-level imperatives that drive the need for greater university AI readiness. Firstly, AI has become a core component of many countries' digital transformation strategies, including in the education sector. However, an absence of clear international benchmarking and policy best practice examples may be slowing progress (Criddle and Jack 2025). Secondly, research undertaken by Oxford Economics in 2025 found that 85% of the rise in unemployment in advanced economies is concentrated in new market entrants (recent graduates) who cannot find work. The research found that "there are signs that entry-level positions are being displaced by artificial intelligence at higher rates." (Criddle and Jack 2025).

In a future where significant proportions of graduate roles are at risk from automation, we believe that there is a policy imperative to ensure that education systems – including universities – are producing graduates who are AI-literate and able to leverage the technology to augment their value in the workforce, rather than be at risk of dis/re-placement by AI technologies.

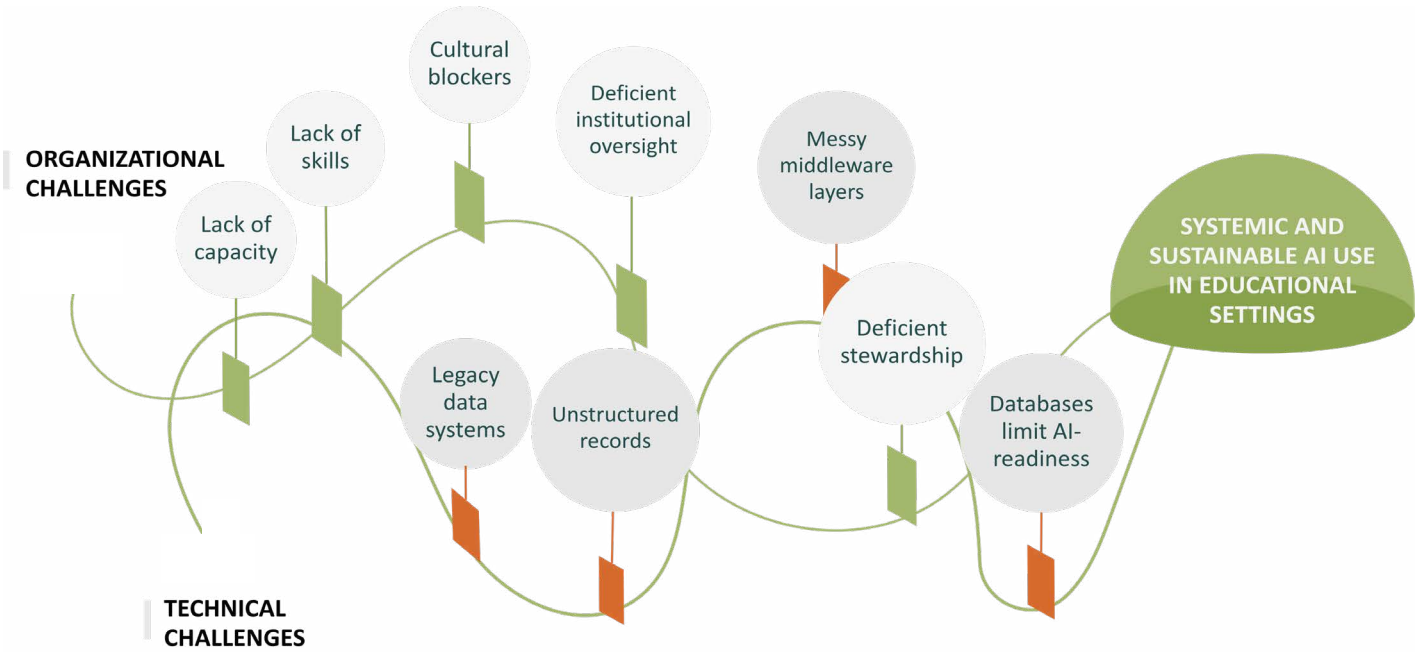

Figure 3: AI implementation process

About this report

As organizations that work with educational institutions at all levels – from early grades providers through to tertiary education institutions and Ministries of Education at a system-wide level – the question of whether universities are ready to embrace AI has been at the forefront of our minds for some time.

The last few years have witnessed an explosion of interest in AI tools, particularly generative AI tools, within the tertiary education sector. Focus has largely been divided between the ethical challenges raised by the technology, in particular the potential for misuse of AI by students and researchers; and the potential of AI to transform teaching, learning, research, and university operations.

> Our interest in AI is more foundational: we want to know how ready universities are to embrace AI systematically, sustainably and ethically for the long-term. Is AI adoption creating genuine value for students, staff and the wider community, or are universities simply exposed to a technology whose costs and limitations have not been fully reckoned with?

Our experience of working in the education sector led us to believe that universities themselves would want to know the answers to these questions too. To test this assumption and get a glimpse into the range of answers that exist to these questions, we decided to ask universities what they were doing to integrate AI into their work directly. To do this, we developed an AI readiness self-assessment tool to be used by our survey respondents and an indexing maturity model to enable benchmarking and inter-institutional comparisons.

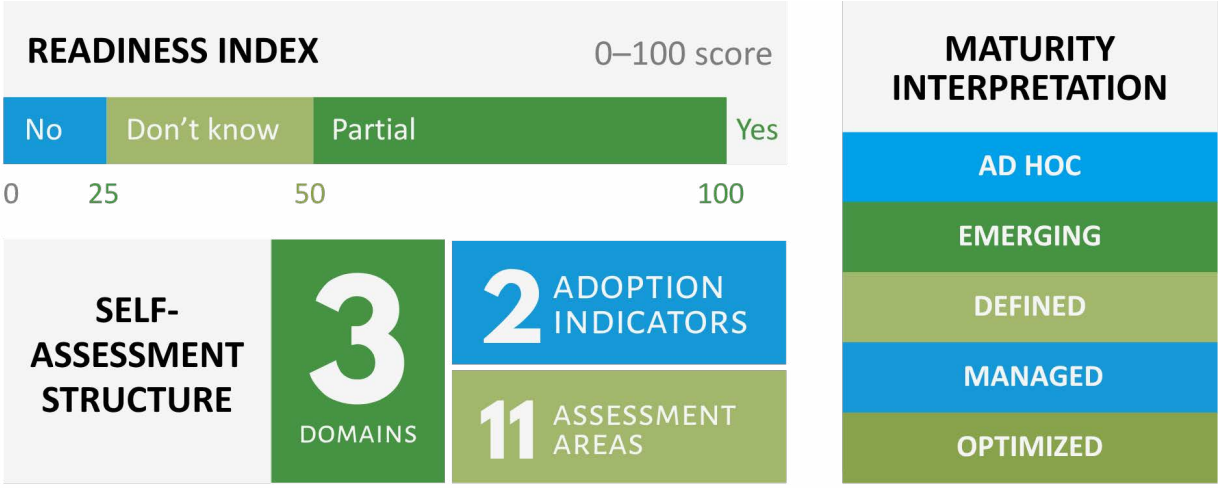

Figure 4: AI readiness self-assessment tool

The remainder of this report provides a cross-regional snapshot of AI readiness based on the 76 responses we received from the self-assessment survey.

The results we received highlight both the promise of AI and the systemic gaps that must be addressed to move from experimentation to scalable and responsible implementation. By grounding insights in self-assessment data, we hope that this report will support universities, policymakers, and ecosystem partners to make informed decisions about AI adoption and ensure that enough strategic focus and resources are being placed on organizational and digital readiness.

2 Understanding respondents' profiles: Interpreting self-assessment results

Who responded to our survey?

The distribution of responses received provides useful and well-balanced insights into self-perceptions of AI readiness from a variety of academic, managerial, and administrative roles.

Moreover, the respondent pool included a strong representation of small and mid-sized universities; defined as those enrolling fewer than 20,000 students. The respondent pool with enrollments exceeding 40,000 is comparatively small.

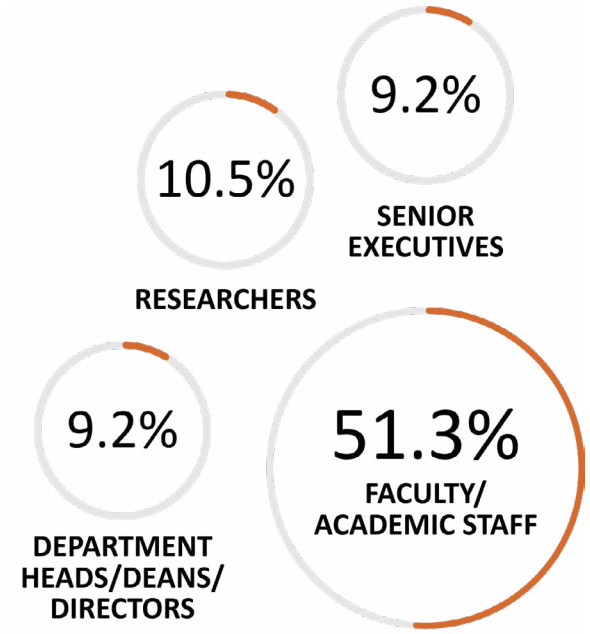

Figure 5: Geographic distribution of respondents

Where were respondents based?

As Figure 6 indicates, most survey responses originated from universities located in the Middle East and Africa, with responses from Europe coming in third and remaining responses from the rest of the world. This broad distribution of respondents enhances our ability to eval-

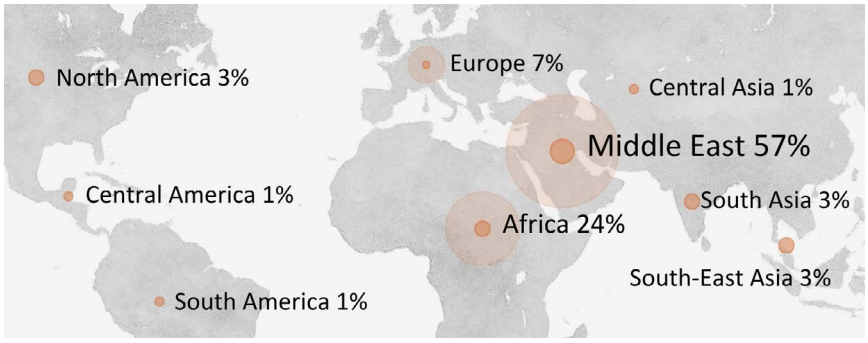

Figure 6: Distribution of respondents by role

uate AI readiness across a range of resource environments and policy contexts. However, it is important to re-emphasize here that the data underpinning this report do not reflect a representative sample of the global higher education landscape but rather provide a snapshot of the range of self-assessed AI-readiness that exists across universities that responded to our survey.

What did respondents say their institutions were using AI for?

As Figure 7 demonstrates, overall, responses suggest that universities are prioritizing instructional and academic support applications of AI, while also exploring its use in communication, research, and student support functions; its use is still fairly limited across the board. Although non-representative, these insights fit trends identified in larger research studies. In the Digital Education Council's Faculty AI Survey (2025), 61% of faculty reported using AI in teaching, while 80% cited a lack of clarity on how AI should be applied institutionally. Similarly, Coursera's AI in Higher Education report highlights persistent gaps in faculty confidence and institutional readiness.

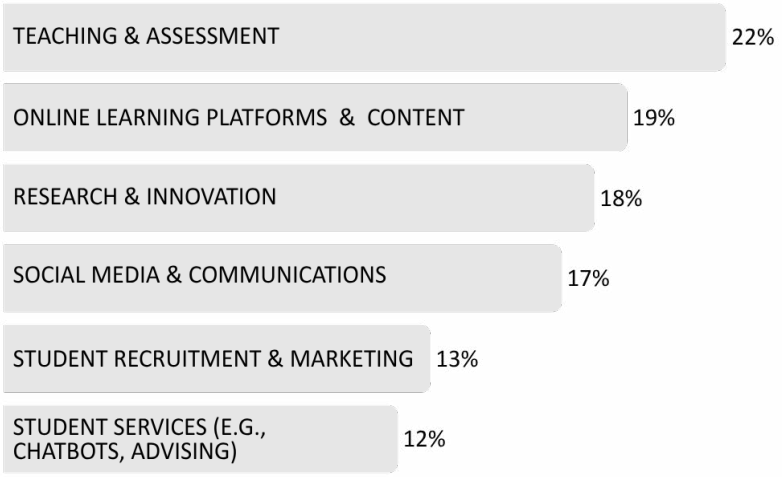

Figure 7: How AI is being used by respondents to our survey

What were the differences in AI use reported between public and private university respondents?

Respondents from public institutions reported a higher degree of uncertainty around use of AI by staff. In contrast, respondents from private universities more frequently reported extensive AI use among staff, in research and teaching activities.

Moreover, public institutions reported a higher degree of uncertainty around students' AI use, indicating a variability in how clearly student AI use is being observed or tracked. In contrast, private universities reported more extensive and entrenched AI use among students. Our data suggests that public universities have less oversight mechanisms in place to enable a clear view of students' and staff use of AI tools. Across both sectors, students appear to use

AI more frequently than staff, highlighting a generational or role-based difference in adoption.

These insights would anecdotally suggest that private universities have competitive advantages regarding decentralized governance, faster procurement cycles, and modern IT systems that support AI adoption. More research is needed to confirm or disprove these assumptions.

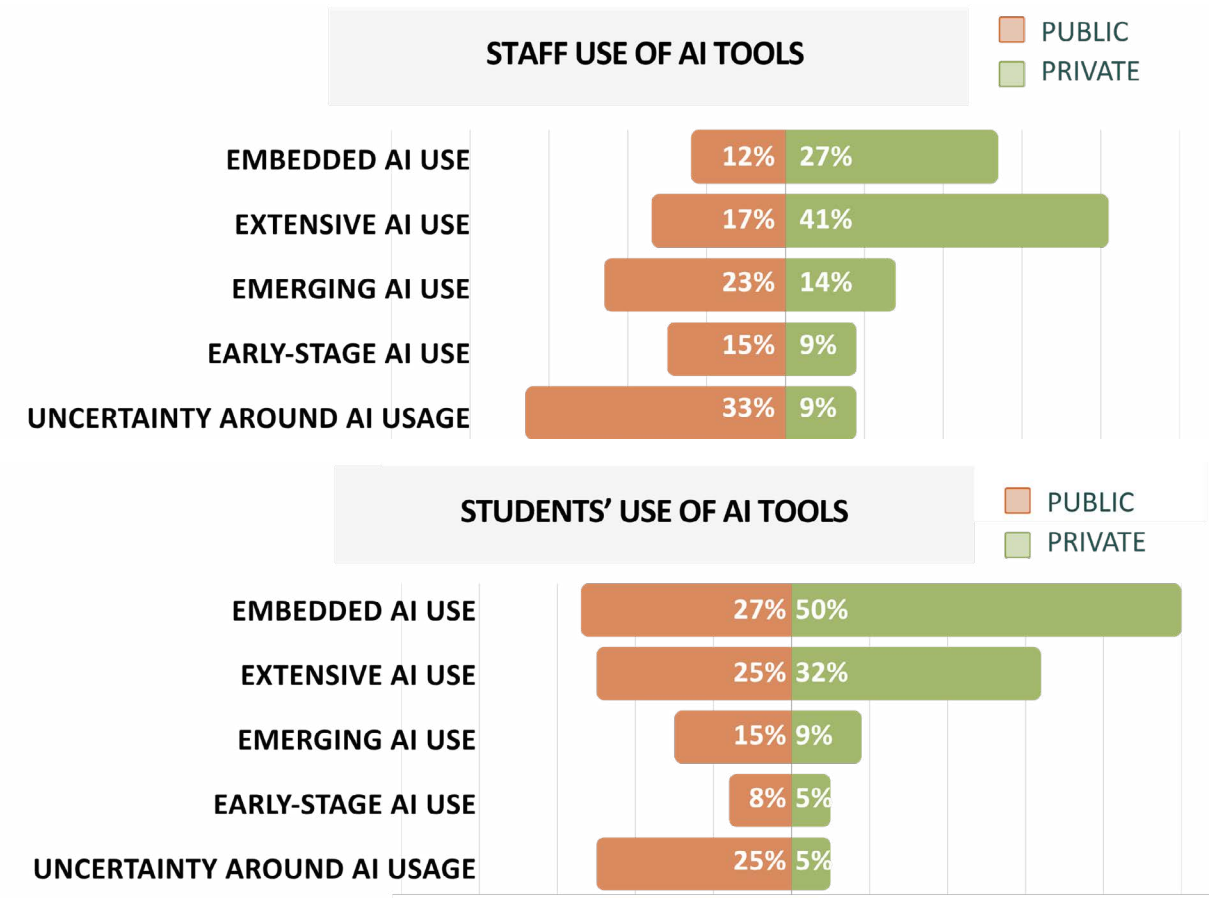

Figure 8: Reported differences in AI use between public and private universities (staff and student use)

What were the differences in AI use reported between African and Middle Eastern survey respondents?

As Figure 9 highlights, our research indicates that more staff at universities in the Middle East are using AI tools than their African counterparts, with a larger share of institutions reporting 'Embedded and Extensive' staff AI use. Conversely, a higher proportion of African respondents self-assessed staff AI use as being 'Emerging and Early-Stage'. Notably, a significant share of respondents in both regions reported uncertainty about staff use levels, suggesting gaps in monitoring or internal visibility of AI use among staff.

Overall, the results indicate that students are widely adopting AI tools across both regions, often at levels that exceed reported staff adoption, underscoring the importance of clear guidance, support, and governance frameworks for student AI use.

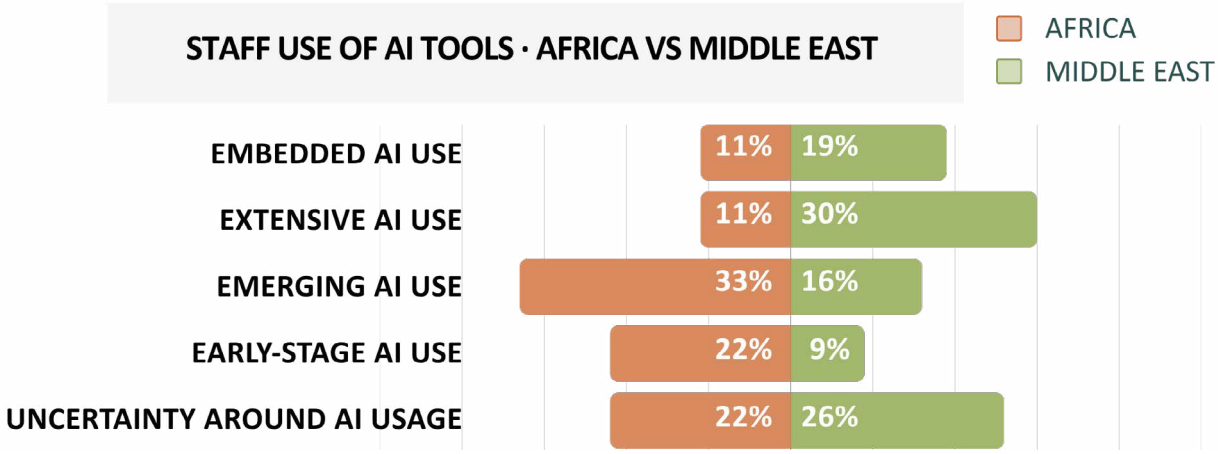

Figure 9: A comparison of self-assessed university staff AI use in Africa and the Middle East

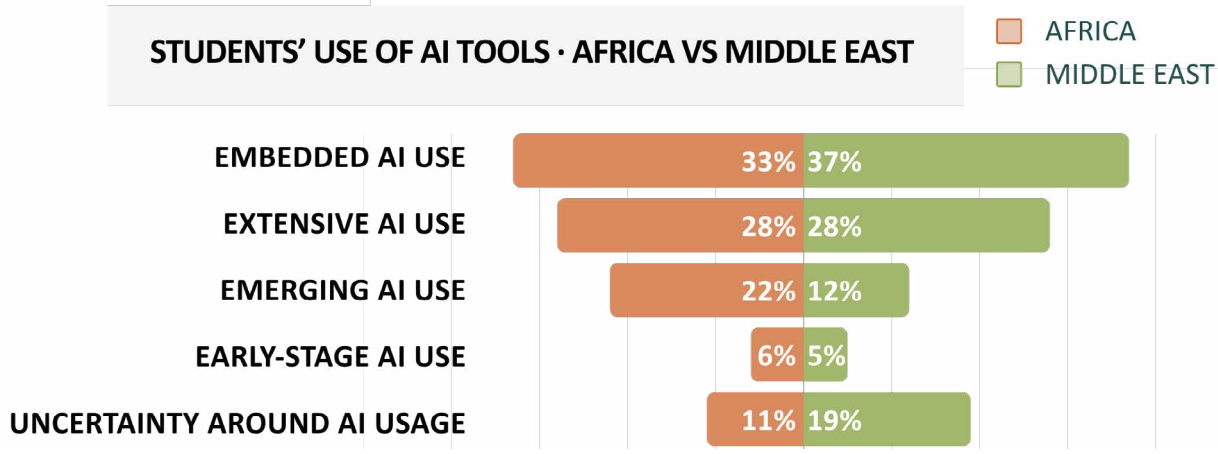

Figure 10: A comparison of self-assessed student AI use in Africa and the Middle East

3 Insights into AI readiness from universities around the world

Key insight: Organizational readiness for AI adoption is trailing leadership ambition

The overarching message emerging from the data is that organizational readiness for AI adoption is trailing leadership ambition. Survey respondents demonstrated a strong appetite to embrace artificial intelligence, and generative AI especially is being used already at scale by students and staff. However, the fundamental building blocks needed for the systematic, sustainable, and ethical adoption of AI are still largely absent or underdeveloped.

There are two key implications for university leadership that we can draw from these insights. Firstly, universities need to develop and adopt AI strategies that clearly articulate institutional aims and ambitions for deployment of the technology. And secondly, many universities appear to be facing an immediate risk of being left behind in the AI race. To meet leadership ambitions, AI should be approached as a strategic opportunity to modernize teaching, curricula, research, and operations.

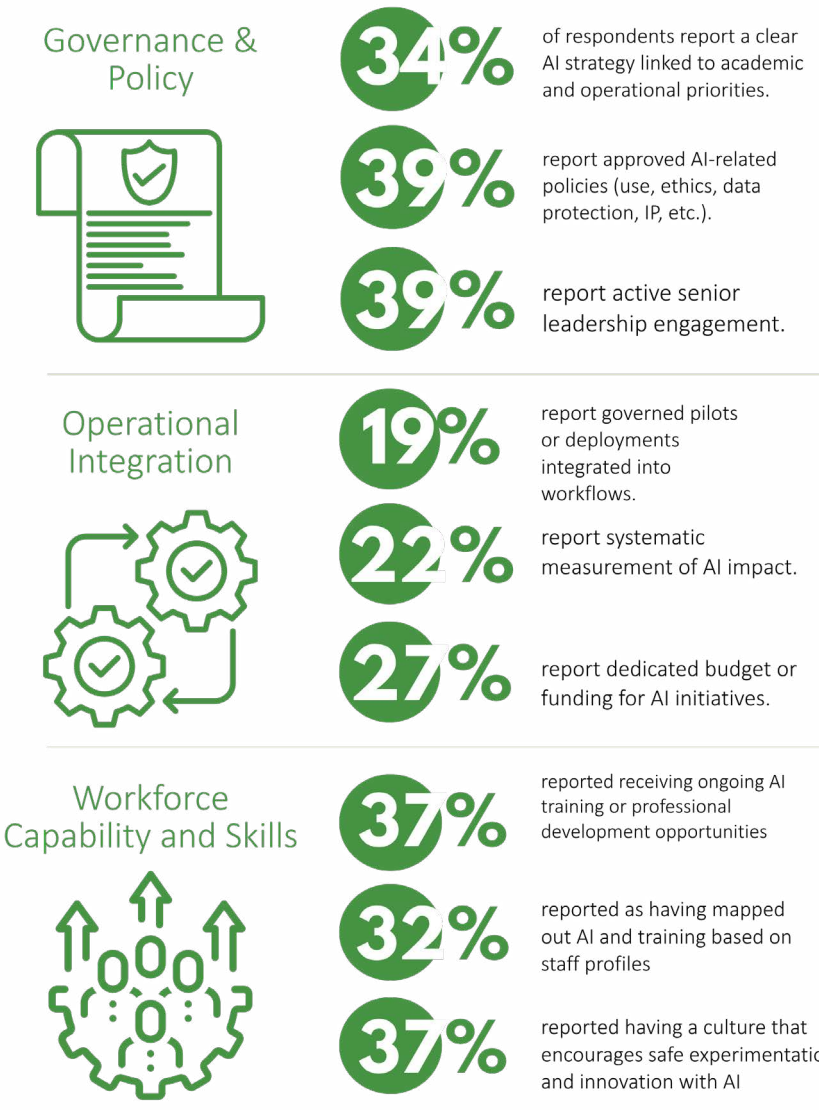

Figure 11: Insights on organizational readiness

Governance and policy insights

Our self-assessment's governance and policy questions are designed to assess the extent to which tertiary education institutions have the governance foundations needed to enable responsible and scalable AI adoption. This encompasses having a clear, institution-wide AI strategy, along with the supporting policies and leadership structures necessary to ensure consistent governance, oversight, and accountability across the organization. Figure 12 highlights the distribution of responses received in relation to this domain.

Applying our AI Readiness Index and Maturity Model to the spread of self-assessments received, it appears that Governance and Policy are progressing towards a defined level of maturity (see Figure 12) but are not quite there yet.

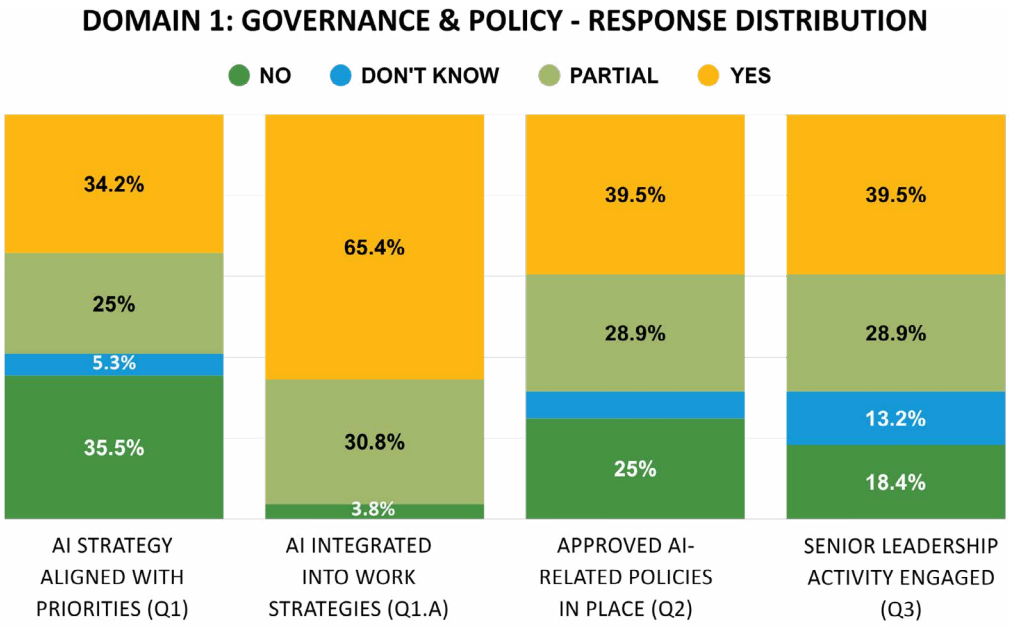

Figure 12: Governance and policy response distribution

Observed Patterns

Reflecting on the spread of responses we received to questions on governance and policy, three observed patterns stood out to us:

- Sixty-six percent of respondents reported that an AI strategy is either not in place, not clearly visible to them, or only partially developed.
- Less than 40% of respondents confirmed that approved AI policies are in place.
- The question on leadership engagement returned the highest "don't know" responses rate across this domain, signaling a visibility and communication gap across the wider institution around leadership engagement.

Priority Improvement Areas

To support responsible and scalable AI adoption, universities should:

- Integrate AI strategy and AI policy into a unified governance framework that ensures consistent oversight across all levels of the institution, supporting academic, research, student support and operational objectives.
- Institutionalize leadership engagement to improve both the visibility of leadership activities, and the communication of their role in AI governance across the institution.
- Where it remains absent, including within their strategic priority-setting, develop an AI strategy. Without a coherent AI strategy establishing clear and appropriate institutional metrics and assigned budgets, universities risk fragmented adoption, misaligned pilots, and inefficient use of resources, limiting the value of AI investments.

Workforce capability and skills insights

Self-assessment questions posed under this domain are designed to assess the extent to which workforce capability foundations are in place to support responsible and scalable AI adoption. Figure 13 demonstrates the spread of responses received under this domain. The domain includes questions on the provision of ongoing AI training and professional development, the systematic mapping of AI skills and training needs across roles, and the promotion of a culture that encourages safe experimentation and innovation with AI.

Overall, responses in the workforce capability and skills domain reflect a defined level of maturity.

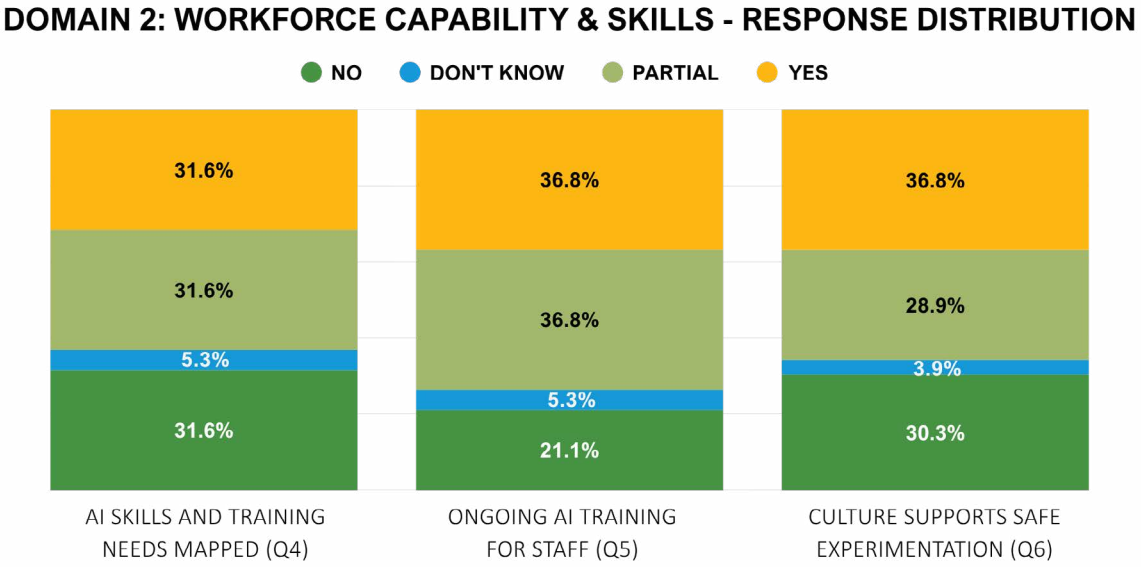

Figure 13: Workforce and skills response distribution

Observed Patterns

The spread of responses to questions on workforce capability and skills suggests two observable patterns:

- There is a clear gap in aligning AI training with role-specific skill requirements. Among respondents who confirmed receiving AI training either fully or partially, 21% reported that the training they received was either not mapped to AI skills and training needs across institutional roles or that they were unaware of such mapping. This highlights the need for more systematic, role-based workforce planning to ensure AI capacity development is fully aligned with actual needs.
- There are encouraging signs of a supportive environment for AI adoption. Overall, 66% of respondents reported that a culture encouraging safe experimentation and innovation with AI is either fully in place or partially present. This suggests positive momentum, while also indicating room to further strengthen and institutionalize innovation-friendly practices.

Priority Improvement Areas

To support responsible and scalable AI adoption, universities should:

- Develop an AI skills framework that caters for academics, researchers, student support, operational staff, and students.
- Support research and innovation through specific capacity building on using AI for research workflows, research administration and research data management.
- Enhance AI training programs, specific to job functions, by establishing ongoing feedback mechanisms to track skill acquisition and identify evolving needs, ensuring workforce capabilities remain responsive to technological advancements.
- Implement a formal process to regularly review and update the AI skills map, aligning professional development opportunities and staff training plans with changing strategic priorities and emerging AI applications.
- Align training with institutional priorities to strengthen faculty confidence, accelerate AI adoption, and enable innovation at the institution-level.

Operational integration insights

Questions posed under this domain assess the extent to which the foundational elements for operational AI integration exist. As Figure 14 highlights, the questions in this domain cover the identification of priority AI use cases, the presence (or absence) of AI pilots or deployments, the measurement of AI impact, the practical application of AI tools and the allocation of dedicated budgets to sustain implementation.

Overall, responses from survey respondents in this area indicate that operational integration remains at an emerging stage, with several enabling conditions only partially established.

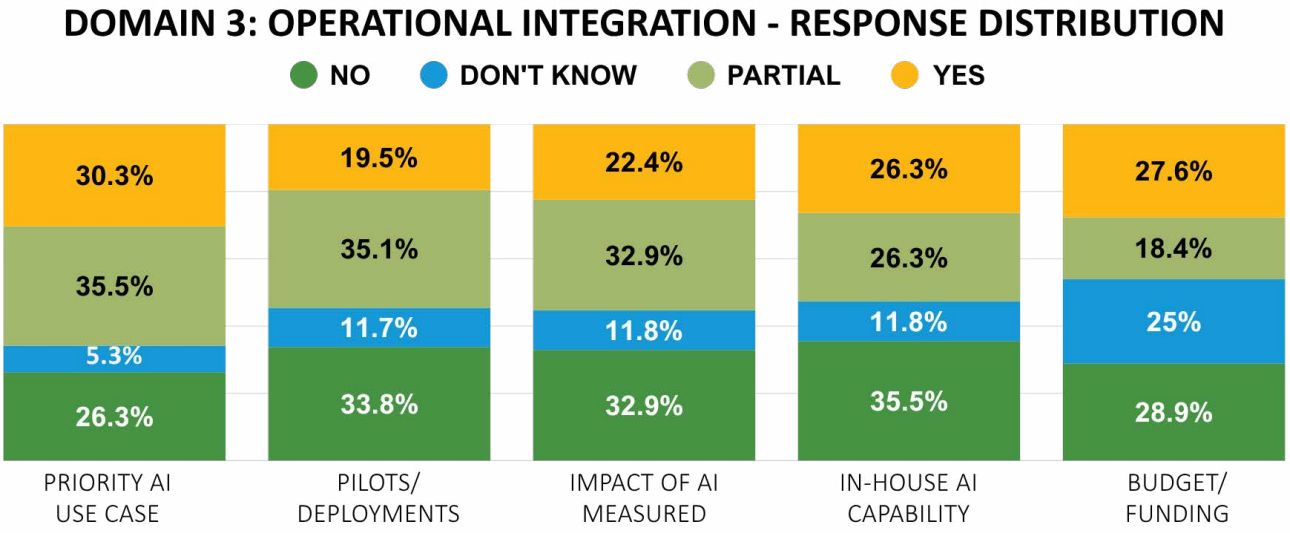

Figure 14: Operational integration response distribution

AI and Academic Integrity

One of the visible and urgent challenges in AI use currently relates to academic integrity. AI tools, particularly generative AI, are widely used by students and staff in teaching, learning and assessment-related tasks. This use is not matched by institutional policies or enforcement capacity. Survey findings show that only 39% of respondents report approved AI related policies in place, while external evidence already shows widespread use of AI tools amongst students. There is currently no plausible way for university academic staff to detect the use of these tools. This creates a significant gap in which AI generated plagiarism and undisclosed use can undermine the validity of assessment systems. Universities are therefore navigating a difficult trade off: restrict AI use (often unenforceable and counterproductive), permitting it freely (risking compromising assessment validity and widespread plagiarism), or managing a middle ground that requires policies, staff training and technical capacity that many institutions do not yet have. This challenge demonstrates how operational use of AI is outpacing the systems that are needed to govern it ethically and responsibly.

Observed Patterns

Reflecting on the spread of responses to questions on operational intgration, three observed patterns stood out to us:

- Movement from planning to implementation remains uneven. Only 20% of respondents indicated that there are active AI pilots or deployments with appropriate oversight in place. In contrast, 70% reported that such initiatives are either partially established or not in place at all, highlighting that operational adoption of AI pilots or deployments is still in its early stages.
- Progress in defining the priority of AI use cases is limited. While 30% of respondents report that priority use cases have been identified, 62% indicated that this is only partially in place or not established at all. This highlights the urgent need for a more organized and deliberate approach to prioritizing AI use cases as a foundation for understanding how AI can be best applied in institution-specific settings.
- Funding for AI is making steady progress, with 46% of respondents reporting that dedicated financial support is either fully established or partially in place. This reflects positive movement toward adoption while underscoring the need to further strengthen funding to support sustainable scales, however a relatively high share of 'Don't know' responses suggests that visibility of budget allocations may vary across roles.

Priority Improvement Areas

To support responsible and scalable AI adoption, universities should:

- Formalize and prioritize AI use cases across teaching, research, student services and operations, establishing a clear pipeline that links high-value opportunities to implement roadmaps and oversight mechanisms.
- Accelerate the transition from planning for AI to execution by expanding structured pilots and deployments with appropriate governance, enabling more consistent operational uptake of AI; and
- Strengthen and institutionalize dedicated AI funding, aligning financial support with priority use cases and implementation plans to enable sustainable scale and reduce fragmentation.

4 Conclusion

Universities are entering a decisive phase in which the question is no longer whether AI will shape higher education, but whether institutions can translate widespread experimentation into coherent, system-level transformation. **The evidence suggests that current trajectories characterized by fragmented adoption, weak governance, and uneven capability are unlikely to deliver the scale, equity, or impact that leaders envision.** Closing this gap will require a shift from individual initiative to institutional orchestration, where strategy, policy, and leadership alignment provide a clear framework for responsible and high-impact AI integration.

Looking ahead, the institutions that succeed will be those that treat AI as core infrastructure rather than an optional add-on. This means embedding AI across curricula, research systems, and administrative functions while investing in role-specific skills, robust governance, data quality and systems, and measurable outcomes. Crucially, progress will depend on linking experimentation to execution: prioritizing high-value use cases, aligning funding with institutional goals, and building feedback loops that demonstrate impact on learning, employability, and operational efficiency. Without this discipline, AI risks remaining diffuse and performative rather than transformative.

At the system level, governments, funders and development partners will play a pivotal role in shaping whether AI adoption reinforces or reduces global inequalities in higher education. Coordinated investments in shared infrastructure, standards, and capacity, particularly in rapidly expanding systems across Africa and the Middle East, can enable universities to leapfrog from early experimentation to scalable, ethical deployment. **The next phase of AI in higher education will therefore be defined not by technological advancement alone, but by the strength of institutional and ecosystem foundations that determine whether AI delivers public value at scale.**

Bibliography

- Baute, Brian Rowdy, Danielle Frontiera, Patrick. 2025. Doing More with Less in Higher Education: How Institutions Drive Efficiency with AI and Automation on AWS. May 12. https://aws.amazon.com/blogs/publicsector/doing-more-with-less-in-higher-education-how-institutions-drive-efficiency-with-ai-and-automation-on-aws/

- Coursera. 2026. AI in Higher Education: Insights on Attitudes, Adoption, and Risks from Over 4,200 Students and Educators. Coursera. https://assets.ctfassets.net/2pudprft-tvy6/4212OYd3CvJK92HoVh2Tws/b18ab922f1906d64fed6b671218bedb6/AI-in-Higher-Education.pdf

- Criddle, Cristina, and Andrew Jack. 2025. "Chatbots in the classroom: how AI is reshaping higher education." Financial Times, July 18. https://www.ft.com/content/adb559da-1bdf-4645-aa3b-e179962171a1?accessToken=zwAGO0owv-EgkdOttVnaG99GRdOqO-F5liFxoQ.MEUCIBuN4AvMOQOY7ZZXnmeqlqZe3JimllSWpkR0c-2Ei48CAiEA4xRYhUtK_da6v1yBVyICCCOALEfP3CKgHh4Zom6RXzw&sharetype=gift&token=87b4bf4c-4c66-4064-b5b9

- —. 2025. "Chatbots in the classroom: how AI is reshaping higher education." Financial Times, July 18. https://www.ft.com/content/adb559da-1bdf-4645-aa3b-e179962171a1?accessToken=zwAGO0owv-EgkdOttVnaG99GRdOqO-F5liFxoQ.MEUCIBuN4AvMOQOY7ZZXnmeqlqZe3JimllSWpkR0c-2Ei48CAiEA4xRYhUtK_da6v1yBVyICCCOALEfP3CKgHh4Zom6RXzw&sharetype=gift&token=87b4bf4c-4c66-4064-b5b9

- Digital Education Council. 2025. Global AI Faculty Survey. Digital Education Council.

- Francisco, Cristina Criddle in San, and Andrew Jack in New York. 2025. "Chatbots in the classroom: how AI is reshaping higher education." Financial Times, July 18: https://www.ft.com/content/adb559da-1bdf-4645-aa3b-e179962171a1?accessToken=zwAGO0owv-EgkdOttVnaG99GRdOqO-F5liFxoQ.MEUCIBuN4AvMOQOY7ZZXnmeqlqZe3JimllSWpkR0c-2Ei48CAiEA4xRYhUtK_da6v1yBVyICCCOALEfP3CKgHh4Zom6RXzw&sharetype=gift&token=87b4bf4c-4c66-4064-b5b9

- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). 2025. The challenges of AI in higher education and institutional responses: Is there room for competency frameworks? UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000394935

- World Economic Forum. 2024. Shaping the Future of Learning: The Role of AI in Education 4.0. Geneva: World Economic Forum. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Shaping_the_Future_of_Learning_2024.pdf

Annexes: Indicator frequency tables

The tables below show response distributions for each readiness indicator (n=76).

1. Does your institution have a clear AI strategy linked to academic and operational priorities?

Response	Share
No	35.5%
Yes	34.2%
Partial	25.0%
Don't Know	5.3%

2. Are there approved AI-related policies (e.g., use, ethics, data protection, IP)?

Response	Share
Yes	39.5%
Partial	28.9%
No	25.0%
Don't Know	6.6%

3. Is leadership (President / Vice-Chancellor, Provost, Vice Presidents) actively engaged in steering and implementing AI initiatives?

Response	Share
Yes	39.5%
Partial	28.9%
No	18.4%
Don't Know	13.2%

4. Has your institution mapped AI skills and training needs across roles?

Response	Share
Partial	31.6%
No	31.6%
Yes	31.6%
Don't know	5.3%

5. Are staff (faculty, researchers, and support staff) receiving ongoing AI training or professional development opportunities?

Response	Share
Partial	36.8%
Yes	36.8%
No	21.1%
Don’t know	5.3%

6. Is there a culture that encourages safe experimentation and innovation with AI?

Response	Share
Yes	36.8%
No	30.3%
Partial	28.9%
Don’t know	3.9%

9. Have priority AI use cases been identified for teaching, research, and operations?

Response	Share
Partial	35.5%
Yes	30.3%
No	26.3%
Don’t know	7.9%

10. Are there pilots or deployments of AI tools integrated into workflows with oversight?

Response	Share
Partial	35.5%
No	34.2%
Yes	19.7%
Don’t know	10.5%

11. Is the impact of AI (e.g., efficiency, student outcomes, service quality) being measured?

Response	Share
No	32.9%
Partial	32.9%
Yes	22.4%
Don’t know	11.8%

12. Are AI tools and solutions used primarily developed and built by in house teams?

Response	Share
No	35.5%
Partial	26.3%
Yes	26.3%
Don’t know	11.8

13. Does your institution have a budget or funding for AI initiatives?

Response	Share
No	28.9%
Yes	27.6%
Don’t know	25.0%
Partial	18.4%