Educating the AI generation.

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WONKHE | Kortext Est 2013

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Foreword

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AI is already reshaping higher education fast. While the big focus has been on student use – especially in assessment – educators are already using AI tools in large and small ways both to speed up the pace of administrative tasks, and in their teaching practice.

Sustaining educational quality and equity, and ensuring that AI is used critically and carefully, and in students' best interests, is not straightforward, but it is a pressing question for institutional leaders. How institutions respond now will determine whether AI enhances learning or simply reinforces existing inequalities, inefficiencies and, frankly, bad practices.

Leadership and governance of AI sets the cultural standard for how AI use develops in curricula. It should be fully transparent how and where AI is used to generate insight and inform institutional decision-making, and strategic plans and performance indicators should reflect commitments to ethical, responsible, and impactful AI deployment, signalling to staff and students that innovation and integrity go hand in hand.

Being an AI-first institution is not about chasing the latest tools or superficially focusing on staff and student "AI literacy." It is about embedding AI thoughtfully in every part of the university. Leaders need to articulate vision, model ethical behaviour, build staff capacity and develop student ability to become next-generation AI leaders.

Staff and students need time, support and trust to experiment responsibly. Infrastructure and external partnerships must be strategic and principled. There must also be continuous evaluation to ensure that innovation aligns with strategy and values.

All this requires strategic investment in AI-enabled infrastructure. Secure data environments, analytics platforms and licensed AI tools that are designed with the higher education endeavour in mind and provide equitable access to staff and students, are essential to provide the foundation for innovation.

None of this is simple – but it is worthwhile, because as the conversations behind the Educating the AI Generation project reveal, the arrival of AI offers the opportunity to critically reevaluate what has always been done in learning and teaching with fresh eyes – and everyone needs to be invited on that journey. ■

01

Introduction: the transformation required from AI is pedagogical, not technological

The jury is still out as to the scale of transformation AI technology will bring in its wake.

It's indubitable – confirmed in the latest iteration of HEPI/Kortext research – that the vast majority of students are routinely using generative AI. The pace of technological change in AI is unprecedented – yesterday's generic LLM slop is today's sophisticated co-worker. And higher education institutions are under significant pressure to show, individually and collectively, that they have a grip on all this, even as the goalposts shift around them.

When, in the course of holding round table discussion sessions with higher education senior leaders as part of the Educating the AI Generation project, we polled attendees on their views of the scale of change AI would bring, the vast majority agreed to some extent that AI will have a transformative effect.

To some extent this is unsurprising, both because of the aspects of higher education that are about repeating well-defined processes at scale – meaning that there is strong potential for AI to support efficiency and add value across institutions – and in that aspects of AI, particularly the creative and knowledge working elements of the technology, appear to offer a direct challenge to some of the core purposes of higher education.

While the opportunities seem credible, the route to realising such opportunities in practice is complicated, and fraught with the potential for unintended consequences. There continues to be concern about the implications for staffing in universities, and the shape of the job market for graduates, particularly those studying creative subjects. There are credible anxieties about the risks to interior cognition and thinking capability, and external adverse consequences if AI is permitted too much control over critical processes. And there are deeply-held ethical and environmental moral issues to be navigated.

Managing a wave of change

Educating the AI Generation set out to find out how institutions are thinking about what educators need by way of support and development in the age of AI-ubiquity. We have conducted formal and informal conversations, in private round tables and publicly at three large-scale events: Wonkhe's Festival of Higher Education, Kortext Live and Wonkhe's Secret Life of Students.

We found that for many institutions, the response to AI feels very much "everything, everywhere, all at once." There is much that remains unknown, and the pace of change can feel overwhelming. Against that backdrop institutions have sought to take "rearguard" action, even if only temporary, to manage the immediate implications for assessment, academic misconduct, and general risks of misuse of the technology.

But institutional leaders are also aware that AI is making conversations that were already live, about the limitations of current higher education pedagogies for student engagement and success, more urgent. Recent Wonkhe research on student use of AI, *Trained to stop learning*, suggests that AI has only catalysed and thrown into relief an existing issue in higher education assessment – the phenomenon of students submitting work they cannot fully explain, mapped mechanistically onto an assessment rubric, in hopes it will suffice to get them through.

That same research showed that students are using AI in multiple different ways, to search for sources, to structure thinking, to feed back on their work, and to backfill knowledge gaps – and are fully capable of being critical and reflective users of AI for education purposes and partners in working out what the future of learning could look like.

So the larger and more significant task for institutions is to start to forecast, describe, and shape a future in which learning is routinely AI-enabled. Within that proposition a range of possible learning futures are embedded, some much more appealing than others.

In pretty much every higher education institution someone – or a group of someones – have been tasked with leading the thinking, convening the

debates and supporting the development of practice that can start to bring the best possible version of that future into focus.

In an article for Wonkhe, Sam Grogan, pro vice chancellor for education and student experience at Loughborough University expressed the sense of dislocation that AI brings – and the associated imperative to ask bigger questions:

> *Every new technology, from writing to print to the internet to large language models has prompted a reconsideration of the relationship between educational purposes and disciplinary knowledge...*
>
> *The questions and discussion I am interested in curating asks academics about the potential shape of their discipline and its associated professions in 50 years: What does it mean to think, and "do" your discipline with and alongside AI? What does AI do to the professional practices and identities of the professions allied to your disciplines? The answers to such questions are more readily imagined through contemporary cutting edge research agendas than by established approaches to engaging students with existing bodies of knowledge.*
>
> *It is only in light of our imagination of the possible futures that await our students that we can start asking what kind of educational environments and approaches we need to build to create the conditions for the development of the skills sets, attitudes and competencies they will need.*
>
> – Sam Grogan, Pro Vice Chancellor for Education and Student Experience, Loughborough University

In that sense, the pedagogical transformation demanded by the arrival of AI is similar to any large-scale change. Some development needs will be visible and immediate, and undertaken individually, while others will be emergent, a result of learning together through structured experimentation and piloting. Pedagogical literacy and competence will be in a much demand as technological knowhow.

Mindsets and skillsets

At The Secret Life of Students, we asked attendees two questions: What skills do educators need in the age of AI? and What institutional challenges could AI help with?

On the first, a clear theme in the response was that the most critical skills for educators in the AI age are overwhelmingly human and relational rather than technical. Trust and compassion for students appeared frequently, along with conceptions around intellectual humility – picking up on themes that arose in our leadership conversations which reflected on the potential threat to "academic expertise" posed by AI. The hope was that acknowledging the challenge would help educators meet it with curiosity and a willingness to experiment – with the associated need for time and space afforded educators by their institutions to do so.

The one area where technical fluency did surface was specific and purposeful: educators need to understand AI well enough to move beyond myth, and to actively demonstrate to students how human skills like critical thinking and communication remain distinct from and complementary to what AI can do.

On the question of institutional challenges, at the operational level, attendees identified genuine appetite for AI to ease administrative burdens such as student records, timetabling, regulatory complexity and wider process automation. There was curiosity about how AI could enable a more inclusive, accessible learning experience. However, this sense of possibility was strongly tempered by the widespread sense of structural and ethical gaps that must be addressed before AI's potential can be responsibly realised.

Digital equity was the most persistent concern; unequal access to tools and resources risks entrenching rather than reducing existing inequalities. Running through many responses was a tension between AI's capacity to enhance the student experience and a worry about its relational costs, particularly the suspicion it can introduce into the feedback relationship between staff and students.

Institutional leaders are alive to these concerns, and will need to show how they stick to an institutional framework grounded in ethics, data security and sensitivity to the potential unintended impacts of AI adoption. Piloting – discussed in the fourth chapter – offers a way to move forward with innovation at the institution level while transparently managing the potential risks.

By supporting small and large scale innovation, within clear guardrails and ethical non-negotiables, and fostering open dialogue not only about AI itself but about the possibilities for what learning and teaching might become, institutions can make transformation feel not only possible, but maybe even exciting. ■

02

High quality learning means developing and upskilling educators on the pedagogy of AI

There's been endless discussion about what students do with generative AI tools, and what constitutes legitimate use of AI in assessment, but as the technology continues to improve there's a whole conversation to be had about what educators do with AI tools.

We're using the term "educators" to encompass both the academics leading modules and programmes and the professionals who support, enable and contribute to learning and teaching and student support.

Realising the potential of the technologies that an institution invests in to support student success requires educators to be willing and able to deploy it in ways that are appropriate for their context. It requires them to be active and creative users of that technology, not simply following a process or showing compliance with a policy.

So it was a bit worrying when in the course of exploring what effective preparation for digital learning futures could look like for our Capability for change report last year, it was noticeable how concerned digital and education leaders were about the variable digital capabilities of their staff.

Where technology meets pedagogy

Inevitably, when it comes to AI, some HE staff are enthusiastic early adopters and innovators; others are more cautious or less confident – and some are highly critical and/or just want it to go away. Some of this is about personal orientation towards particular technologies – there is a lively and important critical debate about how society comes into a relationship with AI technology and the implications for, well, the future of humanity.

Some of it is about the realities of the pressures that educators are under, and the lack of available time and headspace to engage with developmental activity. As one education leader put it:

> *Sometimes staff, they know that they need to change what they're doing, but they get caught in the academic cycle. So every year it's back to teaching again, really, really large groups of students; they haven't had the time to go and think about how to do things differently.*

But there's also an institutional strategic challenge here about situating AI within the pedagogic environment – recognising that students will not only be using it habitually in their work and learning, but that they will expect to graduate with a level of competence in it in anticipation of using AI in the workplace. There's an efficiency question about how using AI can reprofile educator working patterns and workflows. Even if the prospect of "freeing up" lots of time might feel a bit remote right now, educators are clearly going to be using AI in interesting ways to make some of their work a bit more efficient, to surface insight from large datasets that might not otherwise be accessible, or as a co-creator to help enhance their thinking and practice.

In the context of learning and teaching, educators need to be ready to go beyond asking "how do the tools work and what can I do with them?" and be prepared to ask and answer a larger question: "what does it mean for academic quality and pedagogy when I do?"

As Tom Chatfield has persuasively argued in his recent white paper on AI and the future of pedagogy, AI needs to have a clear educative purpose when it is deployed in learning and teaching, and should be about actively enhancing pedagogy. Reaching this halcyon state requires educators who are not only competent in the technical use of the tools that are available but prepared to work creatively to embed those tools to achieve particular learning objectives within the wider framework and structures of their academic discipline. Expertise of this nature is not cheaply won – it takes time and resource to think, experiment, test, and refine.

Educators have the power – and responsibility – to work out how best to harness AI in learning and teaching in their disciplines, but education leaders need to create the right environment for innovation to flourish. As one leader put it:

> *How do we create an environment where we're allowing people to feel like they are the arbiters of their own day to day, that they've got more time, that they're able to do the things that they want to do?... So that's really an excitement for me. I think there's real opportunity in digital to enable those things.*

Introducing "Educating the AI generation"

For our project "Educating the AI generation" we wanted to explore how institutions are developing educator AI literacy and practice – what frameworks, interventions, and provisions are helpful and effective, and where the barriers and challenges lie. What sort of environment helps educators to develop not just the capability, but also the motivation and opportunity to become skilled and critical users of AI in learning and teaching? And what does that teach us about how the role of educators might change as the higher education learning environment evolves?

At the discussion session Rachel co-hosted alongside Kortext advisor Janice Kay at the Festival of Higher Education in November 2025 there was a strong sense among attendees that educating the AI generation requires universities to take action on multiple fronts simultaneously if they are to keep up with the pace of change in AI technology.

Achieving this kind of agility means making space for risk-taking, and moving away from compliance-focused language to a more collaborative and exploratory approach, including with students, who are equally finding their feet with AI. For leaders, that could mean offering both reassurance that this approach is welcomed, and fostering spaces in which it can be deployed.

In a time of such fast-paced change, staying grounded in concepts of what it means to be a professional educator can help manage the potential sense of threat from AI in learning and teaching. Discussions focused on the "how" of effective use of AI, and the ways it can support student learning and educator practice, are always grounded in core knowledge of pedagogy and education.

On AI in assessment, it was instructive to hear student participants share a desire to be able to demonstrate learning and skills above and beyond what is captured in traditional assessment, and find different, authentic ways to engage with knowledge. Assessment is always a bit of a flashpoint in pedagogy, especially in constructing students' understanding of their learning, and there is an open question on how AI technology can support educators in assessment design and execution. More prosaically, the risks to traditional assessment from large language models indicate that staff may need to spend proportionally more of their time on managing assessment going forward.

Participants drew upon the experiences of the Covid pivot to emergency remote teaching and taking the best lessons from trialling new ways of learning and teaching as a useful reminder that the sector can pivot quickly – and well – when required. Yet the feeling that AI is often something of a "talking point" rather than an "action point" led some to suggest that there may not yet be a sufficiently pressing sense of urgency to kickstart change in practice. ■

03

Institutional AI response is a human, not a policy challenge

During January 2026 Wonkhe and Kortext hosted three private senior round tables, engaging with senior leaders and colleagues from more than 25 institutions from across the sector, to discuss the institutional response to AI in learning and teaching, and the changing expectations of educators in particular.

Our findings show that discourses focused on strengthening and implementing institutional policies may not take account of the way AI is challenging some of the fundamental architecture of learning and teaching management and institutional change.

Clarity is not available

At the heart of the challenge is a tension between staff's desire for clarity from institutional leaders about taking a formal position on AI use, and the need for local interpretation of the risks, possibilities and applications of the technology. Participants talked about fostering "productive discomfort", and a mindset of "curiosity over certainty." As one senior leader put it:

> *We understood that the opportunity and risk was going to be different between disciplines, between programmes, even modules. Yet at the same time, we had people saying, well, why isn't the university producing a policy? Why isn't it telling us what to do?*

Behind those demands, they noted, lay "a lot of worry, fear about what it meant for the future of teaching and assessment and higher education. And also their own concern that they weren't digitally or AI literate enough."

Confident exploration of the implications of AI requires a level of psychological safety, as one participant noted:

> *No one feels able to say, 'I'm really scared of this, or I don't understand it, or I'm not interested, or, help. Or, oh, this is amazing and I love it'... I think I've spent a lot of time acknowledging and saying to people, 'yes, I understand this is difficult as a human. This is fundamentally changing, not just how you work, how you live, how you exist, and how society is as well.'*

Leaders are being called on to offer clarity and certainty when there is still a great deal that is unknown. Sessions discussed the various emerging possibilities for how in the coming years the external AI landscape will evolve further, with applications and uses in primary and secondary education; changing expectations of AI competence among graduate employers; and the ways the AI market in general will likely coalesce around particular platforms, applications and use cases.

Institutions may make informed guesses in some of these areas and may have some not inconsiderable power to shape how the future evolves, but it remains a high-stakes – and potentially high-cost – gamble, with clear risks to equity between students and between institutions depending on their access to technology. One leader at a smaller institution described their sense that the sector is gearing up for an AI "arms race" – a metaphor that captures both the reality that different institutions are starting from wildly different places and positions of power, and the distinct prospect of nobody winning as everybody rushes to adopt the technology of the moment whether or not its value has been proven.

There remains a knowledge gap between the sense that things will change and the exact nature of that change, illustrated by one comment about employer perspectives:

> *I asked CEOs at an employer engagement event who thought students needed AI skills and they all raised their hands. When I asked what they meant by skills there was a lot of looking at the floor and embarrassed coughing.*

Another pointed out that many industries are also experiencing a level of whiplash with AI:

> *it does seem to be that they're still trying to understand the landscape themselves. So it's not that they're always able to articulate to us exactly how they want students to be using it, because it's such a moving picture for them as well.*

Given that is the case, it is arguably surprising that institutions have to a large degree been expected to work this out for themselves, on an individual basis. As one leader commented:

> *This is a massive decision for every institution, because whatever is decided will determine the flavour and shape of what student experience is, what staff opportunities are, what the nature of AI literacy and student AI literacy is all about.*

The traditional approaches to making policy and developing strategy may not be sufficient – or sufficiently speedy – when the landscape is so uncertain.

A mixed response

Yet despite all the challenges, and the need for human sensitivity and compassion, it does seem reasonable and necessary to address the question of what can be expected of educators in this emerging learning landscape. And it is hard to avoid a sense arising from our discussions that the established mechanisms to develop and support effective learning and teaching may need to scale up to achieve the kind of positive human-centred learning experience that the arrival of AI both demands and which it can, deployed appropriately, help facilitate.

It's clear that there is a large volume of work going on across the sector to respond to AI. Institutional leaders, together in many cases with designated institutional leads for AI, are convening and supporting debate, strategic discussion, and concrete development and sharing of practice and use-cases for AI. Most institutions are thinking about "AI literacy" and defining the moments AI should show up positively in learning, teaching and assessment, as well as the moments where it should be formally excluded, through formal student journey mapping, curriculum review and assessment reform.

When engaging any community, there are obviously going to be some early adopters and enthusiasts who will be leading the charge in doing things differently, and others who need to be persuaded that their time and effort is worth the change. While the technology continues to evolve and there are many different tools available, those who are curious and willing to experiment are well positioned to find productive ways to deploy AI, allowing for some false starts and failures.

From a leadership perspective, supporting the principle of experimentation or giving "permission to experiment" is seen as critical. One senior leader articulated this sense that experimentation becomes a valued element of professional practice when the landscape is changing rapidly:

> *We can't predict where we're going to be in five years, and we couldn't have predicted where we are now. All we can do is give people the tools to use them, and the confidence to really step out of comfort zones and push those boundaries, and also reward people who are doing that. We need to start to reward the risk takers.*

But free experimentation is not everyone's preferred way to develop – we also heard that there is a need for clear examples of the application of AI tools in professional practice or, as one attendee put it, the "opportunity to expose colleagues to quite a focused or structured use case." Another pointed out that these use-cases need to be developed within disciplines:

> *The problem is, people attend training; they attend these AI literacy workshops and everything, yet nobody tells them their own use case. For example, how would a physics professor know how to use AI for their physics work? Or a physics student know how to use it for physics work? The same goes for a marketing student, a finance student. So, we discussed that for this to work, it has to be discipline-level or faculty-level training that has to happen, either by champions or people who know that area really, really well.*

Another observed:

> *I find when I talk to staff I focus on their discipline – their passion – and how it might change and be enhanced with AI. This tends to give a way into them taking control of how they want to contextualise AI in their teaching and research.*

There is a strong sense that whether arising from professional anxiety or a critical view of the technology, institutions are having to offer quite a lot of personalised support and encouragement for some educators to engage with the ways AI could change their practice.

While all this work and energy shows the sector could by no stretch of the imagination be accused of being sanguine in the face of transformation, there are also hints arising from our conversations that there are cultural challenges of the kind that will feel very familiar to anyone tasked with implementing institution-wide change. While every institution could probably point to multiple innovative projects and agendas around AI, there is no consensus within the academic community about the scale of the transformation AI is likely to bring or what the corresponding responsibilities of educators might be.

One leader captured this tension:

> *What worries me is that we have such diverse views among staff: staff who absolutely embrace AI and just say, 'yes, we'll get on, we're using it, we'll do, you know, as much as we can with it' and others who say, 'no way, we're not letting AI anywhere near anything in my module, because, it's just taking over from what students need to learn.'*

Another said:

> *I think perhaps we've been in a situation where we can say, well, I know my discipline, I'm an expert, I can understand, perhaps, how the job market is evolving, and I engage with employers and so on. And AI seems to be putting a cat among the pigeons, where there's lots of staff who are saying that this is really like a generational divide like nothing else, so we don't know what to expect. How can we prepare our students for that? And so I feel there's a big culture change piece there.*

A steep learning curve

What we heard across our conversations was a view that AI is forcing, in potentially quite a positive way, a confrontation with the core value of higher education. As one leader said:

> *We have to think about what is the purpose of a university, and I think that then it will have to be about those human skills. We're bringing people together, we're inducting them into their disciplines, in person, in an active way.*

Another specifically expressed enthusiasm for adopting "much more authentic, iterative, process-led assessments that are much less about just producing one final output or artefact at the end of a piece of work, trying to actually capture the student's developmental journey they go on during their degree programme."

When asked directly what they will expect to see from educators over the next few years as a response to AI, leaders articulated a sense of a systematic and critical engagement across all their institution's programmes. For example:

> *[I would want staff to have] contextualised it, they've understood and they've considered how it works within their teaching, so that's their learning outcomes, what they're doing in the classroom, what they're including the content, and how that relates to the assessment, but also how that relates to their wider discipline. And also to employability of students taking their discipline out into the world.*

Another said:

> *I would say that I would want everyone in my institution to design every assessment in a way that makes conscious and up-to-date choices about AI. Which could be designing and could be designing out, but it needs to be considered and balanced... I would also want everyone to have really considered their learning outcomes in view of the modern world.*

There's no sense here that the leaders we engaged with plan to enforce AI adoption in particular ways, but there is a clear expectation that educators acknowledge and muster a professional response to the ways that AI is reshaping their disciplines, the expectations of students, and the way they teach and assess. Apart from any wider consideration of quality or educative purpose, it is simply not sustainable for students to have widely disparate experiences of AI-enabled learning, and receive different instructions on what is permissible depending on their module or programme.

Nobody wants the sector to buy incredulously into what one attendee dubbed "tech bro hype" or to adopt an uncritical or ill-informed stance in deploying AI technology in teaching and learning. We were struck in the discussions how institutions seem to be bringing the various tools of higher education to bear on the AI challenge: open debate; experimentation; structured research and development projects; and partnership and co-creation of response with students.

Yet we can't help but observe that the hoped-for systematic engagement articulated by the leaders we spoke to sits somewhat at odds with the current environment for learning and teaching development in which there are multiple opportunities to engage but often little by way of formal obligation. And if the scale of transformation is as great as some predict, then a lack of deep critical engagement in any quarter potentially becomes a significant issue if higher education institutions find themselves less able to adapt as a result.

Leaders are mindful of the risks; as one put it:

> *You can't just say we want to do what we've always done, and somehow plug AI in – that's not going to work this time around.*

Another added:

> *In other industries and in the commercial sector, there wouldn't be an option not to grow, and not to transform, and not to move forward with the technology available, and they would be working to the best that they could afford.*

While AI remains an emerging technology and the various possible learning futures remain hypothetical, it is possible, and even desirable, to debate, experiment and explore with a coalition of the willing within institutions. But leaders are mindful that if AI drives large-scale change, educator development may need to be more comprehensive than in the past. ■

04

Controlled experimentation with AI: the power of a pilot

In Educating the AI Generation, we set out to find out what higher education institutions are doing to support and develop educators to navigate the opportunities and challenges that AI brings in its wake.

And in one sense, we have failed to answer our own question – because based on our conversations, institution-level policies or systematic development interventions that take academics out of their disciplinary context most likely aren't going to be the critical factor in supporting educators to develop their teaching practice.

Our conversations so far have led us to two quite important conclusions: that the desired future state is for individual academics and course teams to come to their own informed and critical decisions about how AI changes their discipline and the implications for pedagogy and curriculum; and that the wide variation in attitudes to and confidence in, not just AI, but to some extent, pedagogy, makes achieving this outcome across the board quite tricky for education leaders to execute.

That's not to denigrate the importance of AI literacy and leadership work that many institutions are rolling out. Such initiatives do important work in creating a shared understanding of the contours of the AI challenge: the processes and professional practices that individuals are already using AI to enable or that might be fruitful for exploring AI-enablement, the core ethical and professional guardrails required for those enthusiasts to experiment safely, and space to explore the particular institutional challenges that AI throws up, particularly around managing assessment.

Nor is it to suggest that institutional interventions are always inevitably ineffectual. Individual academic practice evolves in the context of an institutional learning and teaching environment, and that environment is a product of intentional design on the part of institutional leadership. Institutions must make (often controversial) choices about what is legitimised in their learning and teaching environment – including which technologies are supported.

AI adoption with care

For most, all the existing core software will now have some kind of (more or less annoying) AI capability. Decisions about what technology to procure and adopt, or mandate, need to be informed by a critical perspective on AI. Some core institutional systems may have the potential to be transformed through AI-enablement – or at least made more effective and scalable. All that means having a clear sense of the alignment between the education strategy and the challenges it sets out to address, and the vision for how technology – including, and especially, AI – sits in that space.

The goal should not be a terrifying AI "arms race," as a leader at one small institution put it, to adopt every possible bit of AI tech available until the money runs out. Simply being AI-enabled across every current function isn't likely to achieve very much in the long run, especially as the technology evolves further and at pace. Instead, as we suggested in our previous article, the goal is to explore, and build, deploying AI where useful or unavoidable, a future learning and teaching state that all can have reason to value.

Where the impact of AI is still unknown, and is by definition emergent, choices about technology procurement are not linear. Claims made for the potential impact of a particular tool or platform need to be tested against the reality of execution on the ground – especially when there are decisions to be made about the most strategic allocation of resources. This is where a really good pilot presents as a critical element of the institutional toolkit.

Piloting the application of a particular platform or tool allows for transparent system-level experimentation, producing data that are available for open discussion and debate. It facilitates an institutional learning journey that is underpinned by a level of rigour – in which the experiences and perceptions of users are not a barrier to be overcome but a critical outcome of the exercise. And, for those who are sceptical or who lack confidence to conduct their own experiments, it offers a route to engagement with experimentation with technology that can help to build confidence without a sense of imposition.

A well-conceived pilot:

1. Situates the technology within a strategic agenda, being clear about the nature of the impact that is sought, while remaining open to unexpected outcomes or results.
2. Engages and solicits the views of a wide range of stakeholders to understand their role in deploying the technology, whether they have associated skills development needs to be able to work with it as intended, and their experience in doing so.
3. Is intentionally designed so as to produce data that will be meaningful and useful – for example, engaging a diversity of different academic departments, defining and gathering baseline data, gathering background user data supported by user experience insight. It helps if you have people involved who have genuine skills in this area.
4. Is transparent about the intentions of the pilot while being agnostic about the outcome – people need to trust that the exercise is not simply an extended procurement process and that if the technology does not deliver for some legitimate reason, it will not be adopted.

There is one caveat to add: even the best designed pilot exercise will inevitably benefit from the strategic focus and enthusiasm of those involved, such that the results may end up being rather better than what can be immediately replicated in an institution-wide rollout. Given that this is the case, it is really important that those running the pilot solicit reflections from those involved about what made the intervention work or the barriers they noticed, so that these can be reflected in rollout if the decision is made to do so.

The case study below exemplifies the kind of critical conversation that thoughtful piloting can enable.

CASE STUDY

Piloting AI tools at the University of Exeter

Megan Kime, Director of education innovation, and Clare Adams, Assistant Director of AI Transformation, University of Exeter

At Exeter, our approach to exploring AI in education starts from our Enabling AI strategy. It provides the strategic intent and an institutional framework, but its real purpose is to create the conditions for exploration rather than to pretend we have all the answers upfront. Within that framework there is an explicit commitment to piloting, and our work on AI-powered learning tools is one expression of it.

We are currently participating in the Jisc coordinated AI in assessment pilot, which is testing AI-assisted tools for formative feedback, and alongside it we are running our own pilots of AI personalised learning assistants. From the outset we have been clear that the outcome of a pilot is not necessarily procurement. What we are really after is insight into benefits, challenges and impacts, and into the broader questions AI adoption raises about data security, integrations and readiness. Even a limited pilot has surfaced significant questions we hope will yield learning applicable to future solutions.

The pilots connect directly to existing strategic priorities. Our Success for All strategy focuses on accessible, inclusive learning environments for a diverse student body, and our Curriculum for Change programme – with its transformative education framework and accessible learning and teaching policy – commits us to inclusivity at baseline and personalisation for stretch. We are mapping where AI might help us advance priorities we have already identified, rather than adopting tools for their own sake.

Attitudes to AI across the institution are strong and varied (often within the same person). Staff and students are working out for themselves what AI means for their practice. Even as contained pilots, we have done extensive stakeholder engagement

and worked through governance forums, taking care to anticipate and respond to concerns. An important framing has been that a managed pilot is a different conversation from institutional rollout – we listen carefully, but the scope is bounded, and the insight we gain becomes evidence we can point to in future decisions.

Our methodology draws on in-house expertise, particularly the user experience research capability in our Digital Transformation division. We have gathered pre-pilot insight from participating students, who are now keeping diary studies, and we will run post-pilot surveys, including with a comparison group of students not involved in testing. We recruited module convenors across a spread of subject areas, mixing volunteers and faculty nominations, and we are capturing their reflections pre- and post-pilot, alongside data insights from the tools themselves and input from colleagues supporting functional elements like VLE integration.

The high-level expectations we are exploring are improvements to student experience, attainment and retention, enabled by technology, alongside improvements to the staff experience, creating greater capacity for richer human interactions. One reflection throughout has been that those engaged in a pilot tend to be colleagues already motivated and capable of integrating technology thoughtfully, and so there would be additional considerations ahead of wider rollout of AI-powered technology.

We can see significant opportunities for data-driven insight and improvement especially if solutions are adopted at scale, but through these pilots we are also surfacing important questions about data generation, usage, and stewardship, and how such data should be used responsibly.

Exeter has a strong history of experimentation and pedagogic innovation, including our Education Incubator which funds experimentation and acceleration of innovative approaches to education. With these AI pilots we are strategy-led, and we are deliberately using piloting to understand the barriers and enablers to institution-wide progress.

Get in touch.

This report is a partnership between Wonkhe and Kortext. For further conversations on any of the themes raised here – or to explore how Kortext can support your institutional digital transformation priorities in teaching, learning, student experience and student support – please get in touch with either of the authors.

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SPRING 2026