WAHEN




# Can AI unlock access to higher education?

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**World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN)**

Launched in 2024, the World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN) is the global organisation to support equitable access and success in higher education. Based at Ruskin College, Oxford, WAHEN is led by a board of world-leading organisations, including the World Bank, UNESCO IESALC, the Asia-Europe Foundation, The Saville Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, University of Oxford and University of California, Berkeley.

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# Executive summary

## 1. Background

Artificial intelligence (AI) is challenging learning, teaching and the worth of higher education. It sits alongside a set of other challenges higher education is facing in the early part of the 21st century. One of the biggest is the endemic inequality in who enters and succeeds in it, with people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds less likely to access and succeed in higher education in every country where reliable data are available, and more than twice as unlikely to do so in over 80% of countries.

This report focuses on the relationship between this inequality and AI. Can AI make higher education more accessible to the millions of people for whom it is a different world? Or will it create new barriers which underserved communities need to overcome? The report draws on evidence from 50 countries collected via a global survey and a series of expert roundtable sessions delivered from July to September 2026. It includes case studies of innovative practice, a series of key findings and a set of recommendations.

## 2. Key findings

### Key finding 1:
### AI can personalise and scale up AI outreach

Effective support at the pre-higher education stage for those from underserved communities is vital for equitable access and success. AI can enable the scaling up of provision via avatars and has the ability to reach far more underserved communities who need support to understand higher education and achieve the grades to enter.

### Key finding 2:
### AI can support more effective, equitable admissions

Admissions systems can be complex, with information traditionally offered in majority languages assuming a level of understanding of systems that not all groups have. AI can enable information provision in multiple languages, the processing of millions of applications quickly in overloaded systems, and the use of contextual data that recognises potential in students from underserved communities.

### Key finding 3:
### Attainment and success can be enhanced via AI

Many students from underserved communities who face challenges in their studies can become lost in the university system as attendance, performance and progression come under pressure. AI can identify problems, enable personalised support and help universities find solutions.

### Key finding 4:
### The cost of AI could be a new equity barrier

AI is not free. The investment in AI tools, staff development and infrastructure risks exacerbating financial barriers which prevent students from underserved communities entering higher education and divide universities on the basis of their wealth.

### Key finding 5:
### AI equitable access and success policy gaps are common

Policies that focus specifically on equitable access and success are far from universal in universities across the world and even rarer at national or regional level. AI policies in higher education are struggling to keep up with the pace of adoption and proliferation. Unevenness in how AI is being used, lack of regulation and monitoring present major risks. Higher education actors have to be pro-active and shape how AI develops in their own sector if the benefits for equitable access and success are to be realised.



# Executive summary

## 3. Recommendations

### 1. Establish a set of AI and equitable access and success principles

A set of principles regarding how AI can advance and not reverse equitable access and success need to be established. These principles need to be developed collaboratively and disseminated to underpin efforts to harness AI to drive forward educational opportunity.

### 2. Introduce AI into higher education outreach activity

Using AI tools presents the opportunity to scale up outreach and admissions with a degree of personalisation that we have not seen before. Doing this though will require collaboration, ambition and the space to innovate.

### 3. Invest in holistic digital transformation

AI is not a free pass for equity. Making AI accessible should be part of the ongoing digital transformation in higher education, which will require publicly funded investment.

### 4. Embed equitable access and success in AI policy frameworks

Policies that can regulate the use of AI are essential. Ensuring university or national-level policies are designed through an equity lens should be a major priority, but it will be one of the biggest challenges here given that equitable access and success policies per se are not common across universities and countries.

### 5. Establish a global AI and higher education equity research centre

There is a pressing need for the incubation and development of knowledge and practice that can inform the delivery of what many participants in this research believe is urgently necessary. A global research centre bringing together those from the equitable access/success space, the AI development space, policymakers, networks and higher education organisations can drive forward the collaboration essential if AI is to shift the dial on equitable access and success.



## 4. The way forward

This report shows that there are a range of ways in which the use of AI can support greater participation and achievement in higher education by underserved communities. However, there are also risks that it will create new barriers. The challenges and opportunities that AI presents are global. Addressing them requires collaboration between higher education providers, governments, international organisations, NGOs and others. But it also requires leadership. AI may be the catalyst that shifts how we teach, learn, research and accredit. The challenge is to harness it so that it can be the catalyst that shifts who participates and succeeds in higher education.

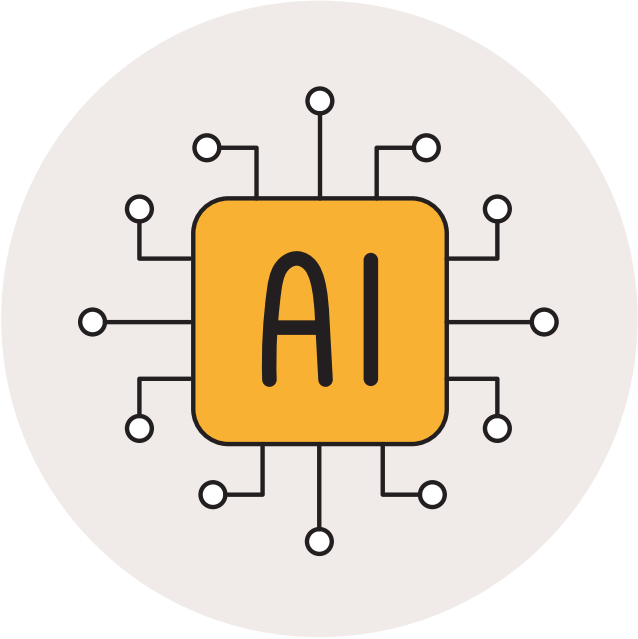


# 1 Introduction

The rising prevalence and potential of artificial intelligence (AI) to shift how we work and live is challenging higher education. It sits alongside a set of other challenges higher education is facing in the early part of the 21st century. These include anti-migration policies, the rejection of experts and evidence, and an endemic inequality in who participates in higher education. It is this interaction between inequality in who participates in higher education and the use of AI tools that is the focus of this report. Much of the focus regarding AI and higher education thus far has been on how it is changing learning, teaching and assessment. Such analysis is critical, but it is inward-looking.

Equally important is the outward-facing implications of AI for higher education. Can AI make higher education more accessible to the millions of people for whom it remains an unfamiliar and inaccessible world? Our work in 2025 looking at inequalities in higher education access and success showed that in every country in the world where we could find reliable data (150 countries), those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to enter and succeed in higher or tertiary education than those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.[1] In over 80% of countries, those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more than twice as likely as those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to enter and succeed.

Inequalities in access and success are pervasive, binding together larger and smaller as well as newer and older systems. They are at the root of the new questioning of the legitimacy of higher education, as those who have never had or are never likely to have a higher education experience question its relevance to their lives. At this critical juncture for society, this report draws on evidence from 50 countries to try and understand where the future lies for access and opportunity in higher education across the world and the role that AI can play here.




1. Atherton, G. and Sit, F. (2025) *Drawing the Global Access Map 2: Understanding higher education inequality across the world.* Oxford: World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN). Available at: https://worldaccesshe.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Drawing-the-Global-Access-Map-2-report.pdf



# 2 Why does AI matter in higher education?

The use of AI in higher education teaching and research has increased rapidly over the 2020s. The pace of change and the differing contexts in which higher education is delivered across the world mean that understanding how it is exactly being used, the extent of use, and its implications is very difficult. The Chegg Global Student Survey 2025, which covered over 10,000 undergraduates in 15 countries, found that over 80% of students worldwide have used generative AI.[2] Looking at staff members, the Digital Education Council Global AI Faculty Survey 2025, which covered more than 1,500 faculty members at over 50 higher education institutions from 28 countries, found that 61% of faculty have used AI in teaching.[3] These studies are just snapshots, but they are consistent with the stream of reports emerging of students, teachers and researchers using AI to support their work.

However, a consequence of the fact that AI is at early stages in its development is that systematic research regarding exactly how it is, or could affect, higher education is at an early stage. Much of the existing literature examines both AI's potential in personalised learning and assessment, and the risks associated with academic integrity and the potential undermining of the credibility of university-awarded credentials. A 2026 systematic review of research on AI in higher education by Mosha *et al.* identified considerable evidence on its functionality, benefits and implementation challenges, but also found the evidence base to be fragmented, with studies often focusing on individual tools or outcomes.[4]

However, considerably less is known about how the expansion of AI will affect equity in access to and success within higher education. A 2025 review of AI and inclusivity in higher education found that while AI technologies are increasingly being adopted, their implementation has more commonly focused on institutional efficiency rather than equity, and initiatives explicitly designed to support underrepresented groups remain comparatively rare.[5] In the review, Cotilla Conceição and van der Stappen identified socioeconomic inequality, cultural and linguistic bias, unequal institutional capacity, and unrepresentative training data among the factors that could limit the benefits of AI.

A 2024 report for the United Nations General Assembly by Farida Shaheed places equity and human rights at the centre of discussions about AI in education.[6] While recognising the potential for AI to support teaching, assessment and educational decision-making, the report highlights the risk that its development and deployment could reinforce existing inequalities. Concerns include unequal access to the devices and connectivity required to benefit from AI-enabled education, gender and other biases within algorithms, and the potential for AI-generated content to reproduce harmful stereotypes. The report therefore argues for a human rights-based approach to AI in education, in which technological development and adoption are assessed according to whether they advance the right to education for all, particularly for marginalised groups, rather than on the basis of innovation or efficiency alone.

Recent international research suggests that the rapid expansion of AI is not being experienced equally across higher education. A global survey of more than 600 students and educators by Zhao et al. (2026), drawing on UNESCO's AI competency frameworks, identified substantial differences in engagement with AI across regions, disciplines and groups.[7] Participants reported barriers including inconsistent institutional guidance, limited opportunities for practical AI training, and inadequate infrastructure, with the greatest challenges identified in Global South contexts. The study highlights the risk that without deliberate intervention, differences in access to AI, opportunities to develop AI competencies and institutional capacity could reinforce existing inequalities in higher education. It consequently calls for approaches to AI competency development that are equitable, sustainable and responsive to different educational and regional contexts.

Rather than examining the impact of AI on higher education as a whole, this report focuses specifically on its implications for equity in access and success: where AI may remove existing barriers, where it may introduce or reinforce inequalities, and what institutions, policymakers and other stakeholders can do to ensure its development supports rather than undermines more equitable higher education systems.

2. Chegg (2025) *Chegg Global Student Survey 2025*. Available at: https://www.chegg.org/global-student-survey-2025 (Accessed: 30 October 2026)
3. Digital Education Council (2025) *Digital Education Council Global AI Faculty Survey 2025*. Available at: https://www.digitaleducationcouncil.com/post/digital-education-council-global-ai-faculty-survey (Accessed: 30 October 2026)
4. Mosha, N. F. V., Chigwada, J., Ketchiwou, G. F., and Ngulube, P. (2026) 'A Systematic Review of Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): Functionalities, Challenges, and Best Practices', *Education Sciences*, 16(2), 185. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020185
5. Cotilla Conceição, J. M., and van der Stappen, E. (2025) 'The Impact of AI on Inclusivity in Higher Education: A Rapid Review', *Education Sciences*, 15(9), 1255. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15091255
6. Shaheed, F. (2024) *Artificial intelligence in education: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education*. A/79/520. New York: United Nations General Assembly. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a79520-artificial-intelligence-education-report-special-rapporteur-right
7. Zhao, X., Miao, F., Xie, H. and Chen, X. (2026) 'Exploring student and educator challenges in AI competency development: A comparative analysis', *Multimodal Technologies and Interaction*, 10(3), 27. https://doi.org/10.3390/mti10030027



# 3 Methodology

This study consists of three parts: a global survey of experts on the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on equity in access to and success within higher education; a series of invitation-only roundtable discussions with stakeholders from across the higher education sector; and a review of relevant literature, policy documents and practice-based examples from around the world.

Through our qualitative and quantitative work, this study engaged 143 individual participants from 50 countries, covering all continents except for Antarctica. Table A1 in the Appendix lists the countries represented in the research.

## 3.1 Global survey

A global survey was administered online between July and September 2026. It was distributed through the World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN) and other relevant higher education and policy networks.

The survey sought to gather expert perspectives on the opportunities, risks and emerging practices associated with the use of AI in relation to equity in higher education. Respondents were asked about perceived impacts on access, admissions, teaching and learning, student success, digital inclusion, AI literacy, data governance, and institutional policy.

A total of 97 survey responses from 37 countries were received, with 3% of responses fully anonymous. Respondents included representatives from universities, government agencies, sector bodies, research organisations, technology providers, and other stakeholders working in higher education.

## 3.2 Roundtable discussions

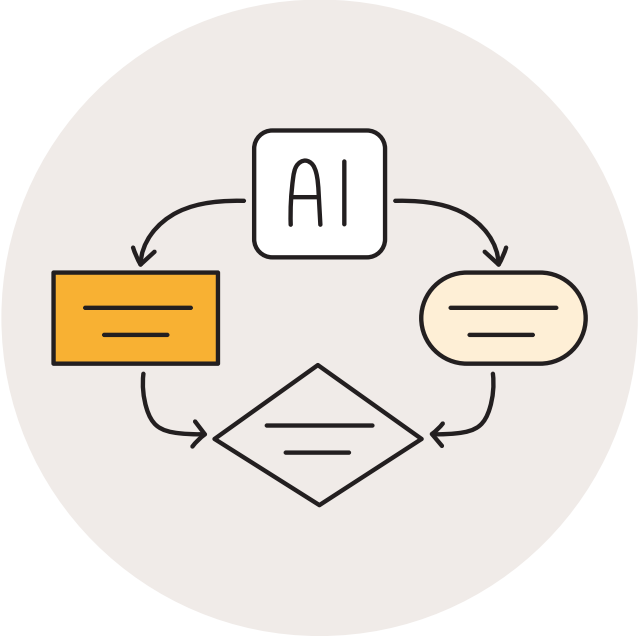
Four invitation-only roundtable discussions were convened online in September 2026 to explore key themes emerging from the survey and broader developments in the field. The team researched, identified and invited various stakeholders from higher education institutions, government agencies, sector organisations, researchers and practitioners with expertise in AI and educational equity to participate in these sessions.

In total, 82 participants attended the roundtables, representing 35 countries. Participants were encouraged to engage in open dialogue and in the sharing of diverse perspectives. Discussions explored both the opportunities and challenges associated with AI adoption in higher education, with particular attention given to implications for equitable access, student success, digital inclusion, AI literacy, governance, and institutional capacity. After the sessions, discussion transcripts and recordings were analysed to identify recurring themes, areas of consensus, emerging concerns, and examples of promising practice.

## 3.3 Case study selection

Case studies were selected to illustrate a range of ways in which AI is being applied in relation to equity in higher education. Examples were identified through survey responses, roundtable discussions, literature review, and desk research.

Case studies were included where sufficient publicly available information existed regarding the initiative's objectives, implementation, and intended outcomes. Particular consideration was given to examples that address barriers to access, participation, retention, attainment, or AI literacy among underrepresented or disadvantaged learner populations.



## 3.4 Limitations

The study draws on expert opinion and stakeholder perspectives to provide insights into emerging developments in AI and its implications for equity in higher education. As the field continues to evolve, some technologies and institutional practices discussed in the report remain at the trial or pilot stage, and new policies and applications continue to emerge. The findings therefore offer a timely assessment of current developments, recognising that the evidence base and practical applications will continue to develop.

Participation in our survey and roundtable discussions was voluntary. The findings reflect the perspectives of those who chose to participate, including individuals and organisations already engaged with AI-related issues. While these contributions provide valuable insight into current practice, priorities and concerns, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of all stakeholders across the sector.




## 3.5 How we define AI & equitable access and success in higher education

For the purpose of this study, AI refers to computational systems capable of performing tasks typically associated with human intelligence, including but not limited to machine learning, generative AI, natural language processing and predictive analytics.

Access and success refer to students' participation in higher education and their attainment of a higher education qualification, regardless of their background. Equitable access and success refer to participation by students who are either in the minority in a particular country or come from a 'disadvantaged majority' who on average earn less or experience greater socioeconomic challenges than a minority population. The nature of the specific minority or disadvantaged majority is defined by the social, economic and political context of a particular country. These groups are usually (although not exclusively) drawn from one or more of the following categories: a low-income or socioeconomic group, students belonging to ethnic and religious minority backgrounds, female students, students with disabilities, students belonging to sexual or gender minorities, older students, or those from rural backgrounds. In this report we have used the term 'underserved' communities to encompass the range of groups for whom equity in access and success in higher education is a challenge.

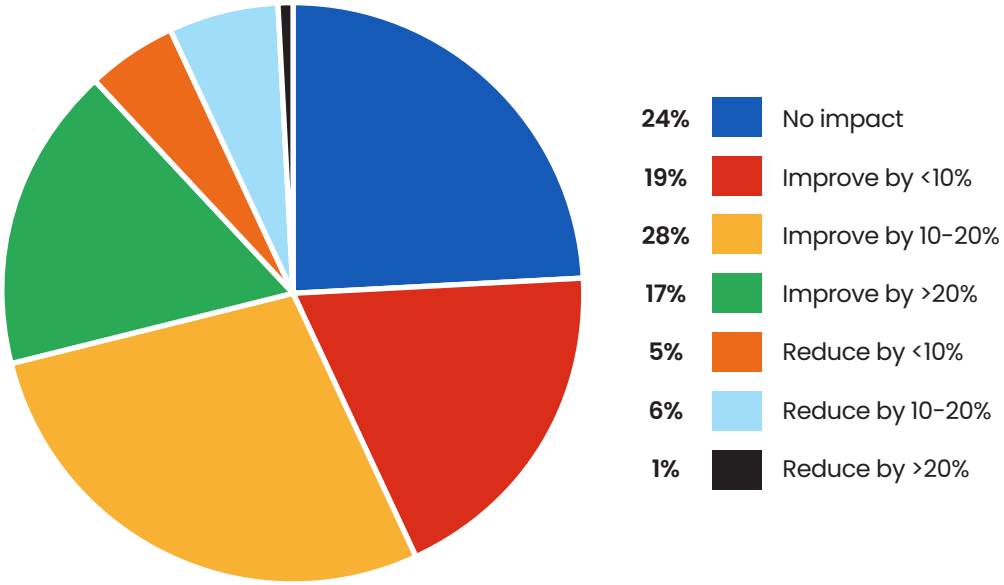
The rest of this report outlines five key findings where AI and equitable access and success in higher education are concerned and then a set of recommendations for policymakers.



# 4 AI must be a key part of universities' outreach to underserved communities

Amid what appears to be seismic change in a system, predicting the future is difficult. As is clear through the findings outlined below, there is much scepticism about the extent to which the use of AI can improve access and success. However, respondents to our survey were in balance optimistic about the impact that AI could have on access to higher education, as Diagram 1 below shows.

**Diagram 1: To what extent do you believe AI will improve or reduce access to higher education for students from underserved backgrounds by 2030? (%)**




Respondents were broadly positive about the long-term impact of AI on higher education access, with nearly two-thirds (64%) anticipating benefits for students from underserved backgrounds.

## 4.1 AI and outreach – scale and personalisation

While the optimism is clear, how AI might support greater access for underserved groups is still a developing field. We know that perceptions of higher education start to form at the elementary stage[8] and reaching the level of attainment required to enter is a product of what happens through school and/or other forms of foundational learning for older entrants. Higher education providers can and should support schools and others to provide information and advice on how and why to apply to higher education, and support attainment raising via outreach work. Evidence also shows that such work can have an impact.[9] Outreach work includes activities designed to encourage prospective students to consider higher education, raise aspirations, and provide information about university pathways and entry requirements.

The challenges with outreach work however have always been scale. Higher education providers and policymakers have never been willing or able to provide the resources to reach the large numbers of learners who lack the understanding of higher education and its merits that their better-off peers take for granted. AI has the potential to enable some of these challenges to be addressed. As Ashish Vaidya from the USA states:

> ***'First-generation students don't have the social capital to successfully navigate educational systems. They can't seek advice from a parent or an uncle or aunt or even an elder sibling, so I think the challenge is how we can help them make better decisions, which is something AI can help with.'***
>
> ***Ashish Vaidya,*** *President and Chief Executive Officer, Growing Inland Achievement, USA*

A key part of what AI could do in combination with widespread, embedded digital access is to scale up university outreach work. As Claudio Andres Rivera described in the Latvian context:

> ***'We are trying to look at how we can get into schools and provide proper, massive training for as many kids as possible, but creating the content ourselves. Last year, we did an experiment where we delivered a lecture to over 25,000 kids. It didn't work out 100% well, but we will try again next year.'***
>
> ***Claudio Andres Rivera,*** *Director of Undergraduate Programs, Riga Technical University Riga Business School, Latvia*

Box 1 below describes an innovative project at Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico that is trying to deploy AI to reach underserved communities at the outreach, pre-university stage.

### Box 1: EMI - Tecnológico de Monterrey Institute for the Future of Education[10]

The El Camino AI Tutor, later renamed EMI, has supported the development of empathy and socio-emotional skills among young people in vulnerable communities in Nuevo León, Mexico. Delivered through WhatsApp, the initiative explored whether AI could provide personalised socio-emotional learning at scale through a familiar and widely accessible platform. The six-week programme involved approximately 450 participants from CONALEP high schools and community centres across eight locations. Students completed activities designed to strengthen empathy and reflect on issues affecting their communities, with different levels of human facilitation used alongside the AI tutor.

Participants using the AI tutor demonstrated increased levels of empathy compared with non-participants. Researchers also reported strong acceptance of the intervention, with 84.4% of participants expressing a positive perception, and participants developed 65 community projects addressing local challenges. EMI demonstrates how AI can extend personalised learning and mentoring-like support to underserved communities through low-cost, widely available technologies.

One of the key features of the EMI project is the personalisation opportunities in higher education outreach that AI offers. Those whose parents or other supporters have experience of higher education can benefit from the personalised guidance and advice they are able to provide. AI will never replace such bespoke support, but it can help extend the reach of outreach activities to learners who might otherwise be missed due to resource constraints.

8. Archer, L., DeWitt, J., Osborne, J., Dillon, J., Willis, B. and Wong, B. (2013) *ASPIRES: Young people's science and career aspirations, age 10-14*. London: King's College London
9. Herbaut, E. and Geven, K. (2019) *What works to reduce inequalities in higher education? A systematic review of the (quasi-)experimental literature on outreach and financial aid*. Policy Research Working Paper No. 8802. Washington, DC: World Bank
10. Treviño, R. (2025) 'AI tutor helps teens learn empathy through WhatsApp', *TecScience*, 11 June. Available at: https://tecscience.tec.mx/en/education-and-humanism/ai-tutor-teaches-empathy/

## 4.2 AI 'literacy' in the schooling system

AI as a tool deployed in the right way may be able to provide scaling opportunities for outreach, but we may need to start seeing it as an essential part of the broader outreach portfolio. Evidence shows that there are inequalities between those from different socioeconomic backgrounds in terms of engagement with AI through schooling.[11]

> ***'Although we all want a democratising effect from AI, so far, it seems [...] that this kind of digital capital, or algorithmic capital, goes together with other forms of capital. So it hasn't democratised things as much as we might want to.'***
>
> ***Viktoria Vajnai,*** *Academic Advisor, Roma Graduate Preparation Program (RGPP), Central European University, Hungary*

Access to AI tools or training is uneven at the pre-higher education stage.[12] If AI increasingly shapes how students research higher education opportunities, prepare applications and undertake learning, those able to develop AI literacy through well-resourced schools or through support from family and other networks may be better positioned than peers without these opportunities. AI literacy becomes a new form of educational capital. Students who already have stronger academic, linguistic, social and digital capital may be better positioned to learn how to use AI effectively, potentially allowing existing advantage to accumulate.

As Ann Borda from King's College, London in the UK argues:

> ***'There must be holistic and linked pathways from early school and high school education, including stepped literacies providing empowerment, made available to students to critically assess use of AI, integrate ethics, understand and use safeguards etc.'***
>
> ***Ann Borda,*** *Visiting Senior Research Fellow, Kings College, London, UK & Principal Research Fellow, The University of Melbourne, Australia*

Joop Bindels from the Netherlands adds:

> ***'Even if incoming students have used AI it doesn't mean that they're AI literate.'***
>
> ***Joop Bindels,*** *Internship Coordinator, Maastricht School of Translation and Interpreting, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands*

Efforts are being made to address these inequalities. In Malta, the AI Ghal Kulhadd (AI for All) programme offers free AI literacy training to all citizens and residents aged 14 and above. The initiative provides accessible, self-paced learning and free access to premium AI tools, with the goal of reducing barriers to participation and promoting more equitable access to AI skills and opportunities.[13] In Canada, the National AI Literacy Initiative launched in September 2026 aims to reach more than 50,000 kindergarten-to-Grade-12 (K-12) educators.[14] There are also examples of projects delivered by universities as part of their outreach work that are designed to reach those specifically in underserved communities, as described in Box 2 below.

### Box 2: AI Literacy Course for Parents and Educators - Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK is developing an interactive online course to help parents and educators support young people, especially those from historically underserved backgrounds, to understand, engage with and use AI safely, effectively and responsibly before they begin higher education. It also aims to build AI understanding and confidence among adults who support such young people in their educational journey.

The initiative combines AI literacy with a strong focus on educational equity. Alongside introducing participants to what AI is, how it works and where young people encounter it in everyday life, the programme's designers are explicitly examining the relationship between AI, the digital divide and educational inequality. The course will explore how disparities in access to devices, internet connectivity, digital skills, and paid AI services may contribute to widening existing educational disadvantages as AI becomes increasingly embedded in all stages of learning.

A key innovation of the project is its focus on the wider ecosystem surrounding young learners. Participants will be encouraged to engage in informed discussions about AI, understand its opportunities and limitations, and identify practical ways to help young people use AI safely and effectively.

The project recognises that unequal access to AI tools and digital resources may create a growing AI advantage gap and it is intended to help educators identify learners who may be disproportionately disadvantaged, thus supporting more equitable participation in an AI-enabled education system.

11. Varsik, S. and Vosberg, L. (2024) 'The potential impact of Artificial Intelligence on equity and inclusion in education', *OECD Artificial Intelligence Papers*, No. 23, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/15df715b-en.
12. Gottschalk, F. and Weise, C. (2023) 'Digital equity and inclusion in education: An overview of practice and policy in OECD countries', *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 299, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/7cb15030-en
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14. Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (2025) *Canada's National Artificial Intelligence Strategy: AI for All*. Ottawa, ON: Government of Canada. Available at: https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/ised/en/canadas-national-artificial-intelligence-strategy-ai-all



# 5 AI can support more effective, equitable admissions but humans must make decisions

Admissions processes into higher education are not uniform across the world. Some countries have admissions systems based on large-scale standardised testing. For instance, the Gaokao is China's standardised annual undergraduate admission exam taken by high school seniors over two to four days every June by over 10 million students. Many countries use a combination of longer-form assessment via written examinations, interviews, personal statements, and consideration of individual student characteristics to make admission decisions.[15] Whatever kind of system is used though, access to information regarding the process of admissions and understanding how the process works is vital. This understanding is not equal amongst different groups and is dependent – as was outlined often in Section 4 – on the level of prior support from family, community and school.

## 5.1 AI and information asymmetry

Both our survey and roundtable discussions uncovered a range of ways in which AI is being used in higher education admissions, by both universities and students. They often try to address this information asymmetry between underserved groups and their peers. Quite common here is the use of AI to give students the ability to have interactive 'conversations' 24 hours a day, with less waiting time and at their own speed via the use of chatbots.

In contexts of displacement and conflict, evidence from Ukraine suggests that AI can help refugee and displaced students overcome barriers to higher education participation and success.

> ***'AI and related technologies are also used to support displaced and refugee students, international students, and learners affected by conflict or mobility. This includes translation and language support, personalised access to learning materials, virtual academic assistance, flexible online learning, and helping students navigate administrative and academic information more easily.'***
>
> *Anna Udovenko, PhD Researcher, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine*

Where such chatbots could be really effective is in providing information on admissions regulations and requirements in a number of languages. As Jason Tutara argues:

> ***'The greatest opportunities lie in providing accessible, personalised, multilingual, and always-available support for learners.'***
>
> *Jason Tutara, Director of Experience Innovation, Waipapa Taumata Rau I University of Auckland, New Zealand*

Such support can be particularly valuable for learners navigating higher education in a language other than the one they use at home. UNESCO estimates that as much as 40% of the world's population does not have access to primary education in a language they speak or understand, with the challenge particularly pronounced in linguistically diverse regions.[16] At the tertiary level, the differences may be becoming even greater as more countries move towards English as the exclusive language of university education.[17]

Around the world, many prospective students encounter admissions processes, regulations and support information in a second or third language. This is especially relevant for students from minority-language, Indigenous, migrant and displaced communities, who are often already underrepresented in higher education. In many countries, university teaching takes place in a dominant national language or increasingly in English, even when neither is the primary language of large sections of the population. Admissions guidance and institutional regulations are often written in complex legal or technical language, creating further barriers to access. AI-powered translation and language-support tools could help make this information more understandable and accessible, enabling institutions to reach prospective learners who might otherwise struggle to navigate higher education systems.

15. Atherton, G. (2021) *University admissions: The international picture*. London: Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/University-Admissions-The-International-Picture.pdf
16. Global Education Monitoring Report Team (2025) *The right multilingual education policies can unlock learning and inclusion: Advocacy brief*. Paris: UNESCO. https://doi.org/10.54676/KDJZ7041
17. Dearden, J. (2014) *English as a medium of instruction: A growing global phenomenon*. London: British Council. Available at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/e484_emi_-_cover_option_3_final_web.pdf

In South Africa, some universities receive over 30 applications per available undergraduate space.[18] As Pauline Essah states:

> ***'Universities in South Africa receive about 700,000 applications a year [...]. Universities are always being bombarded with questions about the curriculum, the prospectus, things like that. The University of Johannesburg has therefore introduced a multilingual AI chatbox - MoUji, to transform student support.'***
>
> **Pauline Essah,** *Chief Executive Officer, Education Sub Saharan Africa, Ghana*

Box 3 across describes the MoUji chatbot used at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa.

## 5.2 Making back-office admissions functions work better

AI can also potentially provide administrative efficiencies, particularly in lower-income countries, which can benefit those from underserved communities. Using AI can aid in a number of ways, including the processing of applications and documents, identifying incomplete applications, identifying potential sources of financial assistance, and communicating with students. In Zimbabwe for example, AI has supported students in applying for higher education and in applying for student finance in the context of a system that is complex and not centralised.

Processing of applications is a good example of where AI can make a big difference. One participant estimated that in Jamaica, only around 40% of applications were reportedly processed on time. Slow processing and delayed response times can have serious implications for applicants awaiting bursaries, visas or work permits. In the world's biggest systems, the potential for AI to contribute to administrative efficiencies in higher education admissions cannot be underestimated. In India, there are approximately 45 million students enrolled in some form of higher education[20], attending over 1,213 universities, 48,246 colleges and a further 15,221 institutions providing tertiary or higher education, with more than 1.3 million prospective students taking the Common University Entrance Test (CUET-UG) in 2024, the most common admissions test used.[21] Shivasakthy Manivasakan of the Institute of Health Professions Education, Sri Balaji Vidyapeeth pointed to the benefits of using AI for automated document and identity verification to speed up processing, alongside the use of multilingual chatbots. The benefits of AI use in this context are again felt by applicants from underserved backgrounds and often those from rural areas in the Indian context.

### Box 3: MoUJi at the University of Johannesburg - Multilingual AI Support to Improve Access to Higher Education in South Africa[19]

In 2026, the University of Johannesburg (UJ) enhanced its AI-powered chatbot, MoUJi, with multilingual large language model capabilities, enabling prospective and current students to access support in isiZulu, Afrikaans, Sesotho, and English. Originally launched in a more basic form in 2019, the chatbot now provides conversational, personalised support across a range of university services.

From an access and admissions perspective, MoUJi is designed to reduce informational and linguistic barriers that can prevent students from engaging with higher education. The chatbot supports prospective students with tasks such as calculating their Admission Point Score (APS), checking admission requirements, applying to university, registering for classes, and accessing information on financial aid.

A key feature of the system is its multilingual functionality, allowing students to obtain information in the language they are most comfortable using. University leaders explicitly linked the initiative to widening access, arguing that language should not be a barrier to information about higher education opportunities.

By providing trusted, institutionally sourced information through a widely accessible, 24/7 digital platform, MoUJi demonstrates how AI can make the admissions and enrolment process easier to navigate for prospective students. The case highlights the potential of multilingual AI tools to improve access to higher education by reducing language, administrative, and information barriers for underserved populations, while complementing existing human support services.

18. Ramirez, E. (2026) 'SA 2026 university capacity crisis: 235K places vs 656K matric passes', *AcademicJobs*, 9 February. Available at: https://www.academicjobs.com/en-za/higher-education-news/sa-2026-university-capacity-crisis-235k-places-vs-656k-matric-passes-academicjobs-3944.
19. University of Johannesburg (2026) 'UJ enhances MoUJi (chatbot) with multilingual AI to transform student support', *UJ News*, 11 August. Available at: https://news.uj.ac.za/news/uj-enhances-mouji-chatbot-with-multilingual-ai-to-transform-student-support/
20. British Council (2026) 'All India Survey of Higher Education findings published', *British Council Opportunities and Insight*, 17 July. Available at: https://opportunities-insight.britishcouncil.org/short-articles/news/all-india-survey-of-higher-education-data-2023-26
21. CUET (2025) 'How many students appear for CUET UG: Category wise details', *CUET.com*. Available at: https://www.cuet.com/how-many-students-appear-for-cuet-ug

AI can help address some of the most common administrative bottlenecks in admissions systems with the development of AI-enabled tools that can cross-check application materials against submission requirements, and flag missing or incomplete information before applications reach admissions staff. The streamlining of routine administrative checks reduces delays and enables staff to focus on cases requiring human judgement. These capabilities may be particularly valuable in large or resource-constrained systems, where incomplete applications and document verification can create significant administrative burdens and disproportionately affect applicants from underserved communities who may have fewer opportunities to correct errors or resubmit documentation before deadlines. Studies of AI use in higher education admissions have identified document processing, application management and workflow automation as among the areas with the greatest potential to improve efficiency in high-volume admissions environments.[22]

It is not just in information provision and administrative efficiency where AI has the potential to support more equitable access to higher education. Many admissions systems are looking to better reflect the background characteristics of students in deciding who should be admitted to higher education. This may be through explicit quota systems or in more institution-specific ways. Gathering and analysing data is a challenge, but AI tools can help here. As Luis Enrique Portales Derbez from Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico states:

> ***'AI is helping us to analyse all the data that we are receiving in a more efficient way in order to identify which students have more potential, accounting for if they are coming from an underserved context or they are facing difficult situations. Basically what we are trying to do is to use AI in order to say, okay, give me your context. And if you overcome this context, then you receive extra points.'***
>
> **Luis Enrique Portales Derbez,** *Experimentation and Impact Measurement Director, Institute for the Future of Education, Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico*

## 5.3 The importance of human decision-making in admissions

However, there is an important distinction between using AI to support admissions and allowing AI to determine admissions outcomes. A common theme from participants is that there should always be a human-level 'ownership' of the decision-making process.

> ***'The most important role of AI is not to replace admissions decisions, but to make information and support more accessible. This is especially important for students from remote regions, low-income families, and those who do not have easy access to professional support.'***
>
> **Alimnazar Islamkulov,** *Director of the Transformation Centre, Tashkent State University of Economics, Uzbekistan*

The key risk here is summarised well by Anna Cristina D'Addio of UNESCO, in terms of how AI tools are designed:

> ***'I believe that one of the major risks of AI is that it can automate inequality. Trained on historical data, these systems can absorb the biases embedded in society and, without adequate regulation, carry them forward, often at scale and out of sight. This is why monitoring how AI is used becomes also critical.'***
>
> **Anna Cristina D'Addio,** *Chief Education Policy, Global Education Monitoring Report, UNESCO*

Nadine Zacharias of Equity By Design, drawing on the Australian context, described some admissions centres experimenting with AI analysis of contextualised admissions and student impact statements, but emphasised that while model testing was taking place, this is not currently being used in practice. Participants repeatedly stressed the importance of retaining human judgement, distinguishing between the use of AI to aid the processing or collation of data and its potential for interpretation and evaluation. There was a fear warning the latter could reproduce existing bias or create new biases.

22. Civan, B.S. (2026) 'The use of Artificial Intelligence in higher education admissions: A scoping review', *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2026.2717193



# 6 Attainment and success can be enhanced via AI

The area where the use of AI is perceived as presenting the most challenges to higher education is in the field of student success. Widespread use of AI by students in undertaking assessments poses threats to what 'success' means and the impact of AI on the labour market also makes successful graduate outcomes more uncertain as the demand for graduates changes. However, while AI may force educators to be more innovative in how they assess students and students to be more creative in how they plot their futures, it can also help support them to complete their courses and attain credentials.

## 6.1 Where AI can make a difference

Across countries, participants identified opportunities for AI to support retention, attainment and progression, including through personalised academic support, greater access to advice outside conventional working hours, assistive technologies, and the earlier identification of students who may be struggling. As Elizabeth Bernal Gamboa, who is Secretary General of the Colombian Association of Universities (ASCUN) states:

> ***'Our higher education institutions are using more AI for success after the student is admitted. We are using early warning systems, digital tutoring, academic or vocational guidance. Around 7 out of 10 institutions that participated in our survey said that they had already begun to develop processes that incorporate AI into student support.'***
>
> ***Elizabeth Bernal Gamboa,*** *Secretary General, ASCUN, Colombia*

ASCUN's survey into the scope of AI usage by universities in Colombia covered 84 universities. Their results suggest that AI is increasingly being used to extend the reach of support services and improve student success after enrolment.[23]

The potential benefit is not simply prediction, but earlier human intervention. As Global Tertiary Education Expert Jamil Salmi argues:

> ***'AI can be very effective in early assessment of at-risk students and then putting in place support systems to help the students. And it can be for various reasons that they need help. It can be financial; it can be psychological and academic. AI also has the potential of finding out which remedial action is more likely to be effective [...] among the various options available.'***
>
> ***Jamil Salmi,*** *Global Tertiary Education Expert*

Predicting that a student might withdraw achieves little by itself; the equity benefit comes when that information enables an institution to intervene earlier with appropriate support.



23. Lloret Romero, M.N. and López Triana, A.P. (2025) *Panorama de la inteligencia artificial en la educación superior colombiana: Exploración de usos y necesidades en las IES ASCUN.* Bogotá: Asociación Colombiana de Universidades (ASCUN).

Box 4 below describes the work of the Pounce Chatbot at Georgia State University, USA, where AI is being used to engage with learners and support their success and attainment.

### Box 4: Pounce Academic Chatbot – Georgia State University, USA[24]

The Pounce chatbot at Georgia State University is a non-generative AI system designed to provide proactive, course-specific support to students in large-enrolment undergraduate courses. It was piloted in Spring 2021 and subsequently evaluated through randomised controlled trials conducted between Fall 2021 and Fall 2022 in introductory Government and Microeconomics courses.

The chatbot was designed to improve student engagement, course performance, and persistence by providing personalised text-message reminders, progress updates, encouragement, assignment prompts, and responses to student questions. Students could interact with the chatbot at any time and receive AI-generated answers drawn from a course-specific knowledge base, with more complex queries referred to a teaching assistant.

Evaluation, with a sample of 2,483 students, found that students who received chatbot communications were four percentage points more likely to earn an A or B in their course than students in the control group. The intervention was also associated with higher homework completion rates, greater use of supplementary instruction and tutoring, and some evidence of reduced rates of course withdrawal and non-completion.

The case is notable because it was implemented at a university where 53% of students received Pell Grants and 63% identified as Black, Hispanic, or multiracial. Researchers found generally consistent benefits across student demographic groups and identified particularly strong effects among women in Microeconomics, who were 11 percentage points more likely to earn an A or B and 10 percentage points less likely to earn a D, F, or withdraw from the course.

The study highlights how AI-enabled communication tools can provide scalable, personalised support in large and online courses, helping students navigate academic requirements and connect with support services. By reducing informational barriers and encouraging engagement, the chatbot demonstrates the potential for AI to support student success and persistence, particularly in learning environments where students may otherwise receive limited individual support.




AI can also help students navigate complex university regulations and processes. At the University of Technology, Jamaica, an AI-powered tool has reduced the need for students to search through lengthy policy documents or rely solely on academic advisers when seeking answers to questions about matters such as examination resits and academic regulations. The tool was developed in response to student demand. As Shermaine Barrett explains:

> ***'We have a tool where students can go in and access the data for themselves, ask any question related to the regulations, and they get their answer.'***
>
> ***Shermaine Barrett,*** *Deputy President and Provost, University of Technology, Jamaica*

There may be a particular benefit here for students who have less access to informal knowledge about how higher education operates, such as students from underserved communities who may be less likely to have family or personal networks who can explain unfamiliar academic processes. Providing straightforward, on-demand explanations of regulations, academic expectations and university services could therefore help address aspects of the hidden curriculum of higher education.

24. Meyer, K., Page, L.C., Mata, C., Smith, E.N., Walsh, B.T., Fifield, C.L., Tyson, M., Eremionkhale, A., Evans, M., Frost, S. and Jung, E.E. (2024) *Let's chat: Leveraging chatbot outreach for improved course performance*. EdWorkingPaper No. 22-564. Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute at Brown University. https://doi.org/10.26300/es6b-sm82

## 6.2 Enabling students to access AI

In order to engage with AI tools though, and to use them to support learning, AI literacy is required. In Section 4.2, the importance of supporting students entering higher education was highlighted, but such support must continue into higher education as well. As Lisa Bardill Moscaritolo from the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) states:

> ***'Higher education institutions should ensure equitable access to AI tools and provide ongoing AI literacy and training for faculty, staff, and students. Senior leadership must also make intentional decisions about how AI is integrated into student support services, particularly for underserved students.'***
>
> ***Lisa Bardill Moscaritolo,*** *Secretary General, IASAS, Belguim*

Box 5 below outlines how the National University of Singapore (NUS) is doing this in practice.

### Box 5: National University of Singapore (NUS) - Building Equity Through Universal AI Access and AI Literacy[25]

In August 2026, the National University of Singapore (NUS) announced a university-wide AI strategy that makes AI education a core part of every student's learning experience. A central feature of the strategy is the provision of free access to ChatGPT Edu for all students and staff. All members of the university community receive baseline access to the platform, alongside access to AI tools embedded within teaching and learning. The initiative seeks to reduce disparities in access to AI technologies and AI skills. A further aim is to ensure that AI literacy is not limited to students in technology-related disciplines. AI-related learning has been integrated across faculties and majors, with more than 85% of undergraduates already undertaking compulsory AI-related courses through their common curriculum.

With approximately 29,600 undergraduates across 15 faculties, colleges, and schools, the initiative represents a large-scale institutional effort to democratise access to AI tools and AI literacy. The case illustrates how universities can use AI strategies to address emerging forms of digital inequality by providing universal access to AI technologies and ensuring that all students, rather than only those in technical disciplines, develop the knowledge and skills needed to participate successfully in an AI-enabled economy.

## 6.3 AI, success and specific groups

While the initiative by NUS is an important one, there is also the need to match what AI can do with the needs of specific groups of students. The most notable of such groups that emerged from our roundtable sessions was disabled students. Participants reported AI being used with disabled students across personalised learning, academic preparedness, assessment, academic advising, career support and wellbeing services.

From Australia, Sue Sharpe, Lecturer in AI and Inclusive Education at Deakin University, specifically identified assistive technologies for access, while Mariana Rodriguez at the University of New South Wales reported developing GPT tools and Copilot agents to embed Universal Design for Learning principles[26] within course materials.

Skye Zhao from the University of Manchester described research she had undertaken exploring the relationship between AI tools and disabled students in the UK.[27] Her research found that students with ADHD, autism and dyslexia appeared to benefit particularly from AI tools in supporting their learning. However, these tools were often being adopted independently by students rather than recognised and provided institutionally as assistive technology. Consequently, students could find themselves paying for premium AI products and learning how to use them without structured institutional support.[28]

Desire Chiwandire from the Technopolis Group, drawing on the South African context, pointed to real opportunities for AI tools to contribute to access to higher education for disabled students in providing the infrastructure that can enable them to learn far more effectively than in the past, thus reducing the disincentive to recruit them amongst universities. As he states:

> ***'Most students don't disclose their disabilities during the application process because they are afraid that might negatively impact on their application because most universities are inaccessible. The moment they realise that this student is going to need more reasonable accommodations, that might impact [their application] negatively.'***
>
> ***Desire Chiwandire,*** *Senior National Expert Consultant, & Independent Scholar specialising in Disability Studies, Technopolis Group, UK*

25. Ang, H.M. (2026) 'NUS students to get ChatGPT access; AI module compulsory for incoming freshmen', *Channel NewsAsia*, 14 October. Available at: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/nus-chatgpt-compulsory-ai-module-6306826
26. Orkwis, R. and McLane, K. (1998) *A curriculum every student can use: Design principles for student access*. ERIC/OSEP Topical Brief. Washington, DC: ERIC/OSEP Special Project
27. Zhao, X., Cox, A. and Chen, X. (2025) 'The use of generative AI by students with disabilities in higher education', *The Internet and Higher Education*, 66, 101014. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2025.101014
28. Dickinson, J. and Marshall, M. (2026) *The Secret Life of Students: Trained to Stop Learning?*, Wonkhe. Available at: https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2026/03/Trained_to_stop_learning_findings-F.pdf

But for this potential to be realised, the tools must be developed collaboratively with students, as Chiwandire goes on to say:

> ***'It's important to strike that balance for students who still want to go to disability units, because those spaces are also spaces of social interaction for students with disabilities.'***

Disabled students are not the only ones for whom AI could play a vital equity role moving forward. Refugee and displaced students face a particular set of challenges in maintaining their studies and AI technologies can be a real asset here via translation and language support, personalised access to learning materials, virtual academic assistance, and flexible online learning. Box 6 below describes a project at the Inholland University of Applied Sciences which aims to support students in their acquisition of Dutch language skills.

### Box 6: AI Language Assistant - Supporting Dutch Caribbean Students Through Conversational AI in the Netherlands[29]

Inholland University of Applied Sciences is one of the largest universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands, with campuses across the Randstad region. It serves more than 37,000 students from over 100 countries.

A research group based out of the university has developed the AI Language Assistant, a conversational AI application designed to help Dutch Caribbean students in higher professional education improve their Dutch language skills. The system uses AI to identify and address common language challenges, including word order, article usage, and emphasis, and enables students to practise these skills through interactive conversations with the AI assistant.

First launched in 2022, the initiative is focused on supporting learners for whom language may present a barrier to academic success. By providing personalised opportunities to practise and improve Dutch language skills, the AI assistant helps students strengthen competencies that are essential for participation and achievement in higher education.

The AI Language Assistant addresses a key challenge faced by some Dutch Caribbean students: studying in a language in which they may require additional support. By helping students improve their Dutch language proficiency, the tool aims to reduce language-related barriers to learning, enabling students to perform more effectively in their studies and enhancing their future career opportunities.

Finally, students in particular challenging contexts can be forced to rely on AI. In Afghanistan at present, access to schools, universities, libraries, and other educational resources is severely restricted for girls and women. As Ayeda Sediqi, an independent researcher from Afghanistan states:

> ***'AI and other emerging technologies are being used as alternative tools to support continued learning. They are used to develop and adapt learning materials, explain academic concepts, support self-directed learning, and expand access to knowledge across different subjects.'***
>
> *Ayeda Sediqi, Independent Researcher, Afghanistan*

## 6.4 Human-centred support

As with the admissions question, there was concern that AI could replace student support led by humans. This could include the range of support from pastoral to academic. AI needs to enable those who are leading and delivering such work to do it more effectively. Finding the correct balance between AI input and human support is particularly important for people experiencing multiple disadvantages, whose circumstances may not fit neatly into standard predetermined 'support pathway' categories.

A major caveat to this finding is that AI is challenging existing understandings of what success in higher education means for all students. It is likely to reshape how students learn, how they are assessed, and the nature of the qualifications they graduate with, but the full implications of these changes are not yet clear. Despite this uncertainty, AI nevertheless has significant potential to support learners from underserved communities to succeed in higher education.




29. Inholland University of Applied Sciences (2022-present) *Conversational AI*. Research project. Rotterdam: Inholland University of Applied Sciences. Available at: https://www.inholland.nl/onderzoek/onderzoeksprojecten/conversational-ai



# 7 The cost of AI could be a new equity barrier

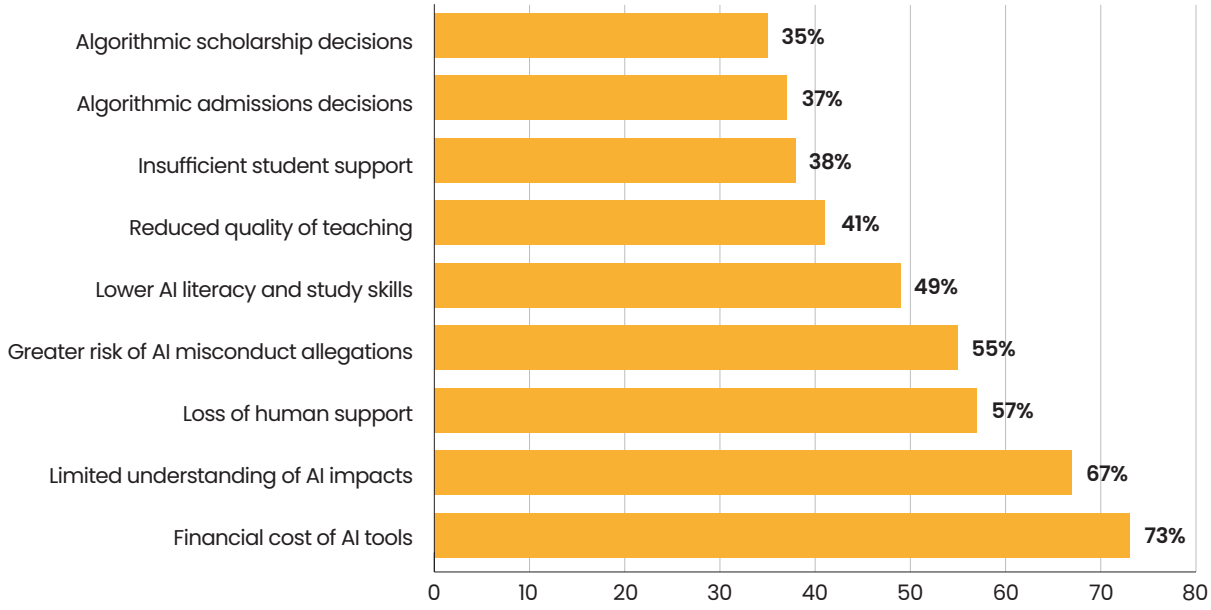
Financial barriers in terms of student support, tuition fees where they exist, and differing levels of resources between universities and systems is at the centre of the endemic global inequalities in access and success to higher education. The rising importance of digitally-enabled learning over the last decade has already introduced a new form of barrier that students from lower-income backgrounds must navigate. AI has been presented as a free or low-cost way for students to enhance the quality of their work and for institutions to make cost savings. The reality is more complex than that. In fact, AI may introduce yet another cost-related barrier that will only add to inequality.

Extreme digital divides exist across the world in the early 21st century. Less than 15% of learners in Sub-Saharan Africa have access to a household computer, and personal mobile phone ownership among young adolescents ranges from just 3% to 40%.[30] But the digital divide means more than just access to a device. The OECD identifies inequalities in connectivity, device availability, infrastructure, skills, and affordability as overlapping dimensions of the digital divide, which can create unequal opportunities to access information and participate digitally.[31] The risk here is that while AI can make a positive contribution to equitable access and success, many will be unable to benefit at all because they lack the resources to access and understand the tools available, and the ability to enhance attainment that AI could provide is denied to those from underserved communities.

## 7.1 The cost and importance of AI

In our survey, the cost of AI was identified as the main challenge in terms of AI usage for students from underserved communities. Participants were asked to identify the factors they believed pose the greatest risks to equitable access and success as AI use in higher education increases. The financial cost of AI tools was selected by 73% of respondents.

**Diagram 2: Factors identified as risks to equitable access and success in higher education (% selecting each option)**




Adam Hennessy from the Universities Admissions Centre (UAC), Australia summarises the digital divide challenge well at the pre-higher education and admissions stage.

> ***'I do not think AI breaks down any barriers. In fact, it puts more in place. If you can afford the $30 a month for the upgraded ChatGPT that's great, but our disadvantaged kids don't have the resources to be able to do that.'***
>
> *Adam Hennessy, Access Manager, UAC, Australia*

30. Wang, D., Shinde, S., Drysdale, R., Vandormael, A., Tadesse, A. W., Sherfi, H., Tinkasimile, A., Mwanyika-Sando, M., Moshabela, M., Bärnighausen, T., Sharma, D., and Fawzi, W. W. (2025). Access to digital media and devices among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa: A multicountry, school-based survey. *Maternal & Child Nutrition*, 21(S1), e13462. https://doi.org/10.1111/mcn.13462
31. Burns, T. and F. Gottschalk (eds.) (2019), *Educating 21st Century Children: Emotional Well-being in the Digital Age*, Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b7f33425-en.

Issues of cost are heightened of course in lower-income countries, and can interact with other divides. Nidhi S. Sabharwal is an academic researcher working in India, and she states:

> ***'Which AI can a student actually use? Is it a free version or a paid version? Do they have continuous access, or access that disappears? Are they working on their own laptops or on a shared smartphone? Gender becomes an important dimension here. Research shows that women and girls are more likely to rely on shared household smartphones rather than devices they own themselves. In resource-constrained households, access may be controlled by male family members, and brothers may be prioritised over sisters.'***
>
> *Nidhi S. Sabharwal, National Fellow, National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA), India*

In terms of AI tools, there are clear differences in the packages available and their costs. Free AI tools offer less capabilities than those that are paid for. Table 1 shows the costs to access the most popular general-purpose generative AI platforms across the major providers available globally.

### Table 1: The costs of AI access

| AI Tool | Tier | US$ month | Core functionality |
|---|---|---|---|
| **ChatGPT**[32] | Free | 0 | General chat and search; limited file uploads, memory and coding. |
| | Plus | 27 | More advanced reasoning; larger message allowances/research, memory and coding tools. |
| | Pro | from 100 | higher usage, stronger reasoning, longer coding sessions and maximum deep-research access. |
| **Claude**[33] | Free | 0 | Chat; web search; file creation and code execution; limited memory. |
| | Pro | 24 | Higher usage; expanded research; Claude Code; design tools; integration with Microsoft 365. |
| | Max | from 100 | 5× or 20× Pro usage depending on tier, higher output limits and priority access to advanced functionality. |
| **Microsoft Copilot**[34] | Free | 0 | Writing assistance; web-based tasks; web search and chat. |
| | 365 Personal | 11 | Integration into other Microsoft programs; advanced chat; greater usage; 1 TB storage. |
| | 365 Premium | 25 | Extensive usage; advanced research and analytics; agentic functionality; greater storage. |
| **Google Gemini**[35] | Free | 0 | Search/writing assistant; image generation/editing; usage restrictions; 15 GB storage. |
| | AI Plus | 6 | Twice the general usage access of Free; integration within Gmail/ Google services; 400 GB storage. |
| | AI Ultra | from 100 | Newest model access; larger usage allowances; advanced research tools; 20 TB storage. |

To put the costs in Table 1 above in context, the average monthly salary in the 25 countries the World Bank classifies as low-income is less than US$95.[36] As one survey respondent stated:

> ***'The cost to access some AI software needs to be removed so that learners can have access. The free versions usually do not offer more than the basics.'***

Participants also highlighted the risks associated with dependence on private AI providers. Many popular tools are currently available through free or low-cost plans on set length contracts, but terms of service, pricing models and usage limits can change. This uncertainty may disproportionately affect learners with fewer financial resources.

32. OpenAI (2026) *Plans and pricing | ChatGPT*. Available at: https://chatgpt.com/pricing/ (Accessed: 30 October 2026)
33. Anthropic (2026) *Plans & pricing | Claude by Anthropic*. Available at: https://claude.com/pricing/ (Accessed: 30 October 2026)
34. Microsoft (2026) *Copilot pricing plans for individuals | Microsoft Copilot*. Available at: https://www.microsoft.com/en-gb/copilot/pricing/individuals (Accessed: 30 October 2026)
35. Google (2026) *Google AI Pro and Ultra — get access to Gemini 4 Argon and more*. Available at: https://gemini.google/subscriptions/ (Accessed: 30 October 2026)
36. Metreau, E., Young, K.E. and Eapen, S.G. (2025) 'Understanding country income: World Bank Group income classifications for FY26', *Data Blog*, 1 July. Available at: https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/understanding-country-income--world-bank-group-income-classifica

## 7.2 Cost, universities and higher education systems

The costs involved associated with AI extend beyond those incurred by individual students. If universities aspire to provide equitable access to AI, this creates a significant resource question for them. They will need to invest in licences, infrastructure, connectivity, and staff capability. Universities themselves operate with very different levels of financial and technological capacity. Inequalities exist not only within universities but between them, with smaller or less well-resourced institutions potentially unable to access the same tools and infrastructure as their wealthier counterparts. This means that the divides between universities and university systems that already exist risk being exacerbated.

> ***'I think institutions with greater resources are already gaining access to the best tools, the best infrastructure and AI literacy much earlier than anyone else is going to have it.'***
>
> ***Aaron Brown,*** *Executive Vice President, Council for Opportunity in Education, USA*

The extent of the divides between countries and the associated risks were best articulated by Olivia Darby from the Wonder Foundation, which works to expand educational opportunities for women and girls in underserved regions globally:

> ***'I'm working with organisations that sometimes are still doing pen and paper applications. And one of the things that we're trying to do is to try and, of course, help them to digitise their application systems. But I think once AI comes into the mix, there are so many more dangers that make digitisation all in one go at this stage so much more challenging.'***
>
> ***Olivia Darby,*** *Chief Executive Officer, The Wonder Foundation, UK*

Differences in institutional capacity go deeper than AI. They sit in a broader context where different institutions and systems sit on a continuum of what was best described by Etom Ofem, Head of Tertiary Education Insights at the British Council in Nigeria, as 'digital transformation', which covers the whole infrastructure of the organisation and its evolution from analogue to digital.

Nor are attempts to invest in AI-related student support necessarily straightforward. This was illustrated by Kate Lehman, at the University of South Carolina, USA, who described the experience of universities which provided institution-wide access to paid generative AI tools:

> ***'At least a couple of institutions have had situations where their faculties have really tried to leverage AI and the university racks up insane bills for the use of the tool that they were not anticipating. And then they have to backpedal and implement a credit system, which then ends up duplicating inequalities, because some students don't have enough credits to do whatever they want to do while others have the ability to pay for their own private licence.'***
>
> ***Kate Lehman,*** *Executive Director, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina, USA*

However, equitable access cannot be achieved through parity in access to AI tools alone. The capacity building of staff is also an issue. They need to be able to evaluate outputs critically, recognise bias and misinformation, understand limitations, and judge when AI should or should not be used. Higher education institutions need to invest in training for students and staff, curriculum development and ongoing guidance, as AI technologies develop. This presents another challenge for less well-resourced institutions and education systems. Pauline Essah of Education Sub-Saharan Africa also drew attention to a shortage of trained staff, warning that without greater training of higher education institution staff the gap will widen between those who have access to resources and those who don't.

Providing access to AI without investing in the capacity to use it risks reproducing existing inequalities in a new form. Without this investment, those students and institutions that already possess greater financial, digital and educational resources may be best placed to realise the benefits AI can offer.



# 8 AI equitable access and success policy gaps are common

The expansion of AI in higher education is moving quicker than the development of policy frameworks that can direct and regulate its use in the sector. This is a common theme across policy areas and across countries, but it is a particular problem in higher education which is slow to move in the face of change. Layered on top of this is the paucity of policy commitments related to higher education access and success across the world. The most recent global studies, undertaken in association with WAHEN, showed that only a minority of countries had specific policies related to equitable access and success and even fewer measurable targets for participation or completion.[37] The review of higher education equity policies across 71 countries undertaken in 2018 found that only 11% of countries had a comprehensive national higher education equity strategy, while just 32% had established participation targets for underrepresented groups. The study also found considerable variation in policy maturity, with only six countries classified as having advanced equity frameworks, while almost half of all countries were categorised as having only developing equity policies.




## 8.1 AI and higher education policy

Participants reported considerable variation in the existence and maturity of national and institutional AI policies. Whilst 41 countries were identified as having a national AI policy or strategy that directly mentions higher education, only 6 of these referenced equity in access and success either explicitly or tangentially.

There was also an apparent gap between the existence of policy and awareness of it: when asked about the policy and regulatory frameworks governing the use of AI in higher education in their region, 27% of survey respondents replied they were unaware if such a policy even existed or not.

Variation is also visible within national systems and individual institutions. Participants described universities, and even different departments within the same university, taking significantly different approaches to AI. Participants frequently described AI policy as institutional rather than national, or reported broad guidance which left considerable discretion to individual universities.

> ***'Universities are allowed to set their specific policies for AI. Effective and ethical use of AI is sought actively, but it is hard to assess the extent of AI use if the user does not acknowledge the use of it.'***
>
> ***Yusuf Oldac,*** *Assistant Professor, Education University of Hong Kong*

Maja Gustafsson of the OECD argued that policy therefore needs to be sufficiently flexible to remain useful as technologies change. As Gustafsson noted:

> ***'Technological change happens very, very quickly, but there is quite a long lag between international discussions, government decisions, and implementation in law or policy [...] How can policy be made to be quite flexible to account for that lag and still be useful in practice?'***
>
> ***Maja Gustafsson,*** *Policy Analyst, OECD, France*

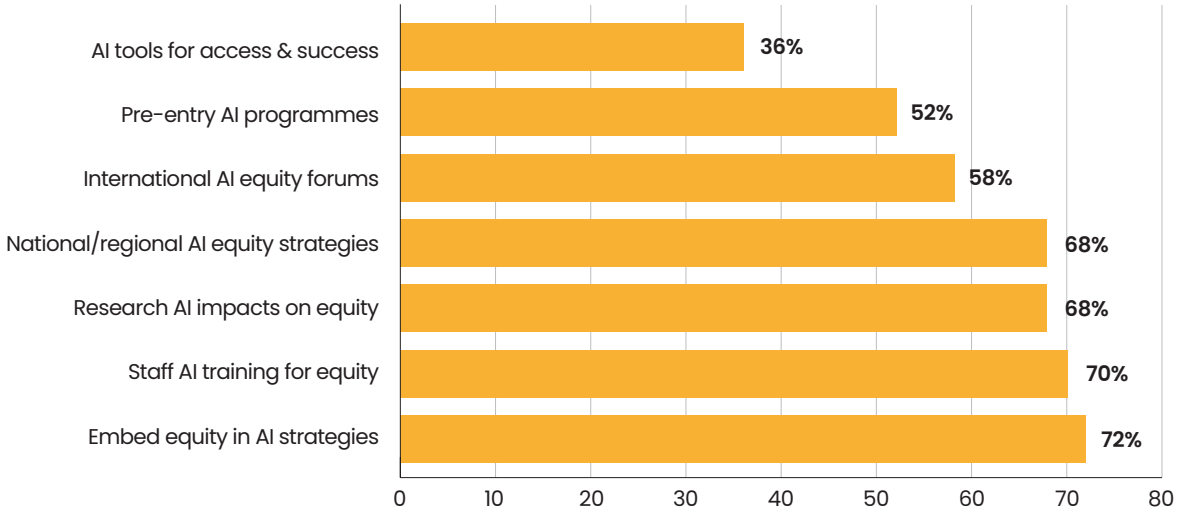
37. Salmi, J. (2018) *All around the world: Higher education equity policies across the globe*. Available at: https://worldaccesshe.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/All-around-the-world-Higher-education-equity-policies-across-the-globe-.pdf
38. Amoah, A., Asiama, R.K. and Kwablah, E. (2025) 'ChatGPT early usage among students: A global evidence of determinants', *Development and Sustainability in Economics and Finance*, 7, 100065. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dsef.2025.100065

Notwithstanding the divisions between students from different backgrounds in terms of access to AI highlighted in this report so far, AI usage is still growing across student groups.[38] Bridgid Freeman is working on research looking at how universities respond to structural disruptions in India and across the world. As she states:

> ***'Students are ahead of many higher education institutions. They are ahead of university policy settings and they are frequently confronted with punitive measures that seek to identify apparently inappropriate users of AI.'***
> ***Bridgid Freeman,*** *Academic Fellow, University of Melbourne, Australia*

The policy response of higher education thus far has included a significant focus on usage control. This is understandable but more than this is needed. Without systematic, holistic strategy, students' opportunities, expectations and protections may increasingly depend upon which institution, course or even individual member of staff they encounter. In this context, evidence shows that it is those students from underserved communities who lose out. As Diagram 3 below shows, developing effective strategies related to AI was ranked by our survey participants as the most important ingredient in harnessing the power of AI to drive forward equitable access and success in higher education. The embedding of equity measures in all AI strategies was the most frequently selected response, followed by increasing staff training on the use of AI to improve equity in access and success, and increasing research into the impacts of AI on equity in access and success in higher education.

**Diagram 3: Actions identified as most important for using AI to support equitable access and success in higher education (% selecting each option)**




Vanesa Millón of Siglo 21 University, Argentina sums up the position well when she argues that universities need to develop uniform governance about what uses of AI are acceptable, when and in what contexts.

> ***'Without institutional policy behind it, AI tends to amplify existing inequalities rather than correct them.'***
> ***Vanesa Millón****, Director of Academic Centres of Excellence, Universidad Siglo 21, Argentina*

## 8.2 Who is shaping AI?

Enabling AI to support equitable access and success depends not only on who can use AI but who builds it, whose knowledge trains it, and whose languages and contexts it represents. As Jamil Salmi states:

> ***'We've talked about AI being used in admissions, and that can be positive and accelerate the value assessment of applications, but at the same time, there is a risk of AI replicating the same bias that selective institutions had in the past because it's trained on what happened in the past.'***
>
> ***Jamil Salmi,*** *Global Tertiary Education Expert*

The development of AI capacity and technology is being led by a small group of countries. The USA alone hosts 37% of the largest data centres, more than the next 14 countries combined.[39] High-income countries control data location and capacity and are driving the creation of the dominant AI tools used in education. The consequence is that AI systems may favour those who speak particular languages, from specific backgrounds, and in certain countries. As Shivasakthy Manivasakan from Sri Balaji Vidyapeeth, India states:

> ***'Many AI systems currently perform better in English than in the Indian languages and the local context.'***
>
> ***Shivasakthy Manivasakan,*** *Director, Institute of Health Professions Education, Sri Balaji Vidyapeeth, India*

Participants pointed to the extent to which the contribution of AI to equitable access and success will be determined by the broader trajectory of AI's development. As a sector, there are limits around higher education's ability to shape the global economic development of AI and its proliferation, but at the same time it is a sector worth an approximate US$1 trillion,[40] with over 269 million students across the world.[41] Higher education is also genuinely global. While its extent may differ, of the 196 countries in the world 194 have a university located in them.[42] It is also the home of many of the researchers that will shape the future of AI for all of society.

A collaborative approach appears to be key. Participants highlighted the value of institutions sharing datasets, expertise and capacity. Many advocated for greater investment in open datasets and shared infrastructure to support more inclusive AI development and reduce dependence on a small number of commercial providers. UNESCO has similarly emphasised the importance of ensuring that AI training data better represents diverse languages and cultural contexts.[43]

Joshua Simuka from Harare Institute of Technology, Zimbabwe sums it up perfectly when he describes the AI challenge facing Africa:

> ***'We need to invest in African artificial intelligence capability. We are saying Africa should not become a consumer of AI developed elsewhere. We need investment in African researchers, universities and technology companies to develop AI solutions that understand African languages, economies, educational systems and development priorities.'***
>
> ***Joshua Simuka,*** *Research Fellow, Harare Institute of Technology, Zimbabwe*

Accepting this broader context though within the higher education sector, there is still much to do that can shape how AI tools are developed and implemented. There was a concern that where regional or national AI policies were being developed, equitable access and success was not featured to a significant enough degree. Sara Ciabattoni of the Open Institute of Technology (OPIT) in Malta has undertaken research in Malta, Sweden, Japan, Myanmar and the Philippines. As she states:

> ***'Current frameworks are still in very early phases and focus little on access and success of underserved learners. Frameworks on K12 are at a more advanced stage. Interviews with all stakeholders (staff, faculty, students) highlighted more scepticism than optimism regarding the role of AI in improving higher education.'***
>
> ***Sara Ciabattoni,*** *Programme Coordinator, OPIT, Malta*

39. Conte, N. (2026) 'Mapped: Countries with the most data centers', *Visual Capitalist*, February. Available at: https://www.visualcapitalist.com/mapped-countries-with-most-data-centers/
40. PR Newswire (2026) 'Higher education market to surpass USD 2.1 trillion by 2032, driven by digital learning and EdTech adoption | Global industry analysis: Maximize Market Research', *Yahoo Finance*, 3 February. Available at: https://finance.yahoo.com/news/higher-education-market-surpass-usd-153000488.html
41. Gutović, V., Bouckaert, M., Xia, T., Quinteiro Goris, J.A., Baroni Boces, G., Sears, M.D., Peterson, M.S. and Osei, E. (2026) *Higher education global trends report: Towards inclusive, equitable and quality higher education in an internationally mobile landscape.* Paris and Caracas: UNESCO and UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC). https://doi.org/10.54674/IN.2026.94
42. International Association of Universities (IAU) *World Higher Education Database (WHED) Portal.* Available at: https://whed.net/home.php (Accessed: 30 October 2026)
43. Miao, F. and Holmes, W. (2023) *Guidance for generative AI in education and research.* Paris: UNESCO. https://doi.org/10.54675/EWZM9535

Policies related to AI and equitable access and success appear to operate on separate 'tracks' at the system-wide level and that of individual institutions. This is particularly significant because seemingly technical decisions can have distributional consequences.

An institutional decision over whether to purchase premium AI licences affects which students can access more capable tools. Decisions about what data are used within predictive systems can affect who is identified as being 'at risk'. The accessibility requirements attached to AI procurement affect disabled students. Decisions about which languages a system supports affect students differently according to their linguistic background. Rules on AI in assessment may particularly affect students reliant on AI-enabled assistive technologies. Equity is therefore not a separate consequence of AI policy. It is one of the criteria against which AI policy should be designed and assessed. The need to bring these different 'tracks' together was identified by numerous participants. As Etom Ofem from the British Council in Nigeria puts it:

> ***'Issues around AI are mostly handed to the ICT (Information and Communication Technology) directors. And so we're like saying, no, no, no, don't treat it as an ad-hoc project. See AI as a culture to give it that right relevance and profile so you are able to drive it across the organisation.'***
>
> **Etom Ofem,** *Head of Tertiary Education Insights, British Council, Nigeria*

Nokuthula Olorunju from the University of Mpumalanga in South Africa adds:

> ***'If we do not have the right people sitting at the table, it really defeats the purpose. AI has taught us that you can't just say, "I am an expert in this field and therefore I am the authority of this." AI has said, you know what, you need more than one authority. You need a number of experts sitting at the table, be it somebody from computer science that sits down with a psychologist etc.'***
>
> **Nokuthula Olorunju,** *Lecturer, University of Mpumalanga, South Africa*

In this context, the role of students, especially those from underserved communities, as producers rather than simply consumers of AI was highlighted throughout the study. Reflecting a widely recognised principle of the disability rights movement,[44] Desire Chiwandire from South Africa emphasised that the development of AI should involve those most affected by it:

> ***'Nothing about us without us.'***
>
> **Desire Chiwandire,** *Senior National Expert Consultant & Independent Scholar specialising in Disability Studies, Technopolis Group, UK*

The need to work with underserved communities for AI tools to have trust and credibility was emphasised by Zaheen Younis from the British International University in Iraq. There is an underlying assumption that if presented with the right tools, designed to reflect the context and the nature of that group, free or at a low cost, those from underserved communities will take up the opportunities offered. This is not necessarily the case. For understandable historical reasons, many communities are wary of technology that can appear imposed on them.

> ***'Collaborating directly with underrepresented groups during the design of such technologies will ensure proper inclusion, and having transparent operation will establish important trust in new technologies.'***
>
> **Zareena Younis,** *Senior Lecturer & Head of Student Development, Faculty of Humanities, International Foundation Programme, British International University, Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq*

In the face of change, organisations can react in a range of ways. Universities have frequently been accused of being sclerotic and resistant to change. Where AI and equity is concerned, greater courage may be required. Owen Ross from Ireland works in a new university that has put access and expanding opportunity at the core of its development.

He argues:

> ***'Institutions need to be brave and embrace the opportunity that AI brings to broaden rather than restrict access. It will take some creativity and it will take some thinking. But it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a reset of everything that we stand for.'***
>
> **Owen Ross,** *Head of Transitions and Student Success, Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest, Republic of Ireland*

44. Langtree, I.C. (2025) 'Nothing about us without us: A disability rights idea', *Disabled World*, 19 August. Available at: https://www.disabled-world.com/disability/publications/journals/nauwu.php



# 9 Policy recommendations

The evidence collected in this report shows that there is a range of ways in which the use of AI can support greater participation and achievement in higher education by underserved communities. However, there are also risks that as AI becomes a permanent fixture in the educational landscape, in whatever form that happens, it will create new barriers. As is the case with AI in higher education per se however, the situation is still developing and the balance between good and bad where equitable access and success in higher education is concerned is uncertain and very context specific. In those parts of the world where the majority of students will be in the future i.e. Africa and Asia, digital infrastructure needs to be developed and AI tools need to be shaped with input from these regions.

What has emerged clearly from this report though is that the challenges and opportunities that AI presents need to be seen as global. The approach taken must be an interconnected one where higher education providers, governments, international organisations, NGOs and others exchange knowledge and practice via collaboration. However, collaboration seldom happens on its own – it takes active commitment. In the case of AI and equitable access and success in higher education, the danger is that many will call for the right things to be done while expecting others to take the lead. Thus, a common theme running through the recommendations below is not just what to do, but who takes responsibility.

### 1. Establish a set of AI and equitable access and success principles

Attempts are being made across the world to formulate AI strategies for countries, higher education systems and universities. The prevailing view in this research is that such strategies need to incorporate higher education equity priorities. To do this, a set of principles regarding how AI can advance, not reverse, equitable access and success needs to be established to underpin this incorporation process. Such principles will need to relate to the use of AI in higher education, such as the need for transparency, human accountability and monitoring of the use of AI etc., but must be framed in a distinctive way that applies to equitable access and success specifically.

### 2. Introduce AI into higher education outreach activity

The scale of the challenge in higher education outreach and admissions has always dwarfed the resources available. As much as we would want the resources to handle this challenge via human engagement, this is not the reality. Using AI tools presents the opportunity to scale up outreach and admissions with a degree of personalisation that we have not seen before. Doing this though will require again collaboration, ambition and the space to innovate.

### 3. Invest in holistic digital transformation

Section 7 shows clearly that cost is, and will be, a major barrier in realising the potential to open up opportunities in higher education for underserved communities. AI is not a free pass for equity. If AI literacy does become a key part of what students need and universities must embed in their systems, then university leaders and policymakers will have to advance their thinking where the critical costs of higher education are concerned. The proliferation of Edtech firms in higher education can help provide solutions here but may also be looking to exploit a sector that is struggling to keep pace with change. AI should be seen as part of an ongoing part of digital transformation in higher education which will require publicly funded investment.

### 4. Embed equitable access and success in AI policy frameworks

Policies that can regulate the use of AI are essential. Across the study, participants pointed to their fears regarding how AI could be used to replace human support or judgement. Some proposed policy frameworks exist such as that from UNESCO. One of the biggest challenges here will be ensuring university/national level policies are designed through an equity lens. It is a question here of both securing the commitment to design in equitable access and success but also supporting those who want to do this with examples of how to do it.

### 5. Establish a global AI and higher education equity research centre

The relationship between AI and higher education equity is best summarised on the basis of this research as one where those committed to equity have clear ideas regarding what should be done, but less certainty regarding how to do it. For example, there is almost universal agreement regarding the need for those from underserved communities to shape the development of AI tools, but how that could happen is far less clear. How do students with non-technical backgrounds, for instance, give meaningful input to the development of highly technical tools? The term 'students' is often used uncritically as though it describes a homogeneous group, when in reality students are highly heterogeneous. How do we engage different groups of students in this design process?

These questions are not unanswerable, and it is perfectly understandable why they have not been answered yet. The development of AI tools is happening quickly and their implications uncertain. But there is a pressing need for the incubation and development of knowledge and practice that can inform the delivery of what many participants in this research believe to be urgently necessary. A global research centre that can bring together those from the equitable access and success space, the AI development space, policymakers, networks and higher education organisation can drive forward the collaboration essential if AI is to shift the dial on equitable access and success.

## 10 Summary

If we are living through the start of the fifth Industrial Revolution, then it could be one that will have a bigger impact on higher education than the previous four. Many of the fundamentals of higher education have remained relatively unchanged over centuries, including its tendency to enable access for some groups while excluding others. AI may be the catalyst that shifts how we teach, learn, research and accredit. The challenge is to harness it so that it can be the catalyst that shifts who participates and succeeds as well.

# 11 Appendix

## Table A1: Countries and regions represented in the research

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Afghanistan | France | Jamaica | Peru | Turkey |
| Argentina | Germany | Kenya | Philippines | Turkmenistan |
| Australia | Ghana | Laos | Poland | Ukraine |
| Belgium | Hong Kong | Latvia | Portugal | United Kingdom (Not specified) |
| Canada | Hungary | Malaysia | Senegal | United Kingdom (England) |
| Chile | India | Malta | Singapore | United Kingdom (Turks and Caicos) |
| China | Iran | Mexico | South Africa | United Kingdom (Scotland) |
| Colombia | Iraq | Netherlands | Spain | United States of America |
| Cote d'Ivoire | Ireland | New Zealand | Thailand | Uzbekistan |
| Croatia | Italy | Nigeria | Timor-Leste | Zimbabwe |

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