From pilots to transformation:

Scaling AI for student success in higher education

2025

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Introduction: Beyond the fringe

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer a fringe experiment in higher education. It is a transformative force reshaping how universities design student experiences, deliver teaching, and organise academic and professional work. From generative tools to predictive analytics, AI is influencing how students learn, how staff work, and how decisions are made.

This paper draws on insights from the recent Ellucian Sector Focus Group Roundtable held in Sydney in June 2025. The session gathered sector representatives for a focused discussion on the opportunities and risks of AI in tertiary education, with an emphasis on scaling beyond pilots, aligning with institutional purpose, and addressing cultural, ethical, and operational challenges.

But while many institutions are experimenting with AI pilots and sandboxes, few have scaled the technology in ways that align with institutional strategy, values, and student needs. As the Head of Higher Education for AWS ANZ, Dr Kevin Bell observed at the Ellucian Sector Focus Group Roundtable:

"Pilots are great, but we're not going to change the system without full assessment of what's out there, what's working, and what's not."

This white paper draws on insights from the roundtable, sector commentary, and global exemplars to explore how institutions can move from experimentation to transformation. Three key takeaways emerge:

1. **Scaling AI requires institutional alignment, not isolated innovation.**
   Moving beyond pilots means aligning AI initiatives with institutional purpose, academic values, and operational realities. Rather than layering AI onto existing systems, institutions must rethink how strategy, governance, pedagogy, and student services work together to support responsible and scalable adoption.

2. **Trust, capability, and culture are critical enablers.**
   Successful adoption of scaled AI hinges on building trust among academic and professional communities. Investing in workforce capability and creating safe environments for experimentation are crucial. Without fostering a culture of readiness and openness, technical adoption will stall.

3. **Equity and ethics must be intentionally designed in from the start.**
   AI's benefits (such as personalised learning and improved access) can only be realised if equity and ethics are prioritised from the outset. Institutions must proactively address digital equity, mitigate algorithmic bias, and uphold ethical governance. Inclusive design and student co-creation are essential to ensure AI supports student success.

The urgency is growing. Students are adopting AI faster than staff. Institutional credibility, student experience, and graduate outcomes now depend on whether institutions can lead (and not follow) this shift.

BEYOND THE PILOT:

Unlocking scalable AI

Reimagining Higher Education with AI: Strategic parallels from other industries

The higher education sector is not alone with the challenge of scaling AI. So before jumping deep into the higher education sector's adoption on AI, it is worth reflecting that the shifts underway in higher education echo patterns seen in other sectors. While the contexts obviously differ, the strategic responses in other sectors offer useful examples for how universities might approach AI-led transformation.

- **Start with user experience, not just technology.** Uber's impact wasn't driven by ride-matching algorithms. It stemmed from rethinking the end-to-end experience. For institutions, the opportunity lies in redesigning how students engage with learning, support, and guidance, making it seamless, responsive, and intuitive.
- **Reimagine, don't replicate.** Monzo didn't digitise legacy banking processes. It redefined the financial experience for digital-native users. Similarly, institutions can move beyond digitising existing workflows to reimagining how education is delivered and experienced in an AI-enabled environment.
- **Integration is the unlock.** Amazon's predictive capabilities are powered by deep integration across data, logistics, and service. In higher education, the potential of AI is realised not through isolated tools, but through alignment across systems, services, and strategy.

What these analogies examples show is that scaling AI in higher education isn't just a technical challenge. It's a cultural challenge. The path forward involves rethinking services, workflows, and institutional mindsets. Scaled transformation emerges not from adopting tools, but from reshaping the conditions in which those tools operate.

The plateau: Why most initiatives stall

The higher education sector is not blind to the lessons of other industries. Many universities have drawn inspiration from the likes of Uber, Monzo, and Amazon to launch pilots that explore AI tutors, chatbots, and workflow automation. But while experimentation is widespread, scaled transformation remains elusive.

Several structural and cultural factors contribute to this plateau in higher education:

FRAGMENTED SYSTEMS AND LEGACY ARCHITECTURE

SHORT-TERM FUNDING CYCLES AND UNCLEAR BUSINESS CASES

GOVERNANCE BOTTLENECKS

CULTURAL RESISTANCE TO RISK AND CHANGE

The contrast with other sectors is not about capability. It's about conditions. In banking and retail, transformation succeeded when digital initiatives were embedded in strategy, supported by leadership, and underpinned by integrated data. Georgia State University's AI-powered early alert system worked, not because of the technology alone, but because it was mission-aligned, centrally sponsored and built on a unified data layer. The university also stuck at it for a long time.

The implication of this for higher education is not that it lacks innovation. The sector has shown a willingness to experiment, often drawing inspiration from adjacent industries. But as the experience of banking and retail suggests, transformation doesn't result from isolated pilots. It results when universities redesign the conditions in which scaled innovation can take root.

"We have anecdotal things – 80 per cent saving, 40 per cent saving – but it's hard to quantify. And the long tail of legacy data? That's a beast we haven't figured out yet."

Dr Ashish Bharadwaj, Associate Director of Enterprise Services, University of the Sunshine Coast

"It's now a space where academics can come together with professional staff to have those conversations and ideate best practice solutions, rather than simply trying to force things through a university process before people are ready to engage with it as a means to improving educational outcomes."

Professor Michael Blumenstein, Pro Vice Chancellor for Business Creation and Major Facilities, University of Technology Sydney

RETHINKING ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS:

AI's human impact

Redesigning academic work

AI has the potential to automate a significant share of administrative academic tasks, such as scheduling, marking, feedback generation, and more. But reclaimed time does not automatically translate into better education. As Kevin Bell posed during the Ellucian Sector Focus Group Roundtable:

"If we're going to give 80 per cent of time back to academics, how can we use that time constructively to amplify 'the human' in the learning experience?"

The opportunity lies, not only in efficiency gains, but in reinvestment into student mentoring, personalised feedback, and cross-disciplinary co-design. These are the human elements that AI cannot replicate, but for which it can make space. This shift is not only operational, but also cultural. As Associate Director of Student Administration, Western Sydney University observed:

"There's not a lot of trust [...] Academics not trusting students. Academics not trusting the institution."

The lesson is clear: trust and agency are not by-products of change, they are prerequisites. Without them, the promise of AI-enabled academic transformation risks stalling at the point of potential.

Workforce evolution, not workforce elimination

AI is reshaping roles, not merely augmenting them. Some will evolve and new ones will emerge. The risk is not change itself, but failing to prepare for it.

- **At risk** – Roles centred on routine information handling, such as course administration, marking support, scheduling
- **Evolving** – Learning designers, academic advisors, program coordinators
- **Emerging** – AI integration officers, governance leads, prompt engineers.

Workers can expect that **39%** of their **existing skill sets will be transformed** or become outdated over the 2025-2030 period

BANKING & MANUFACTURING

AI adoption faltered where staff felt **excluded or undervalued**

(The World Economic Forum)

74%

of **employees** believe their **organisation's approach to productivity** needs an overhaul

81%

would be **more satisfied** if they had **more input on productivity measures**

(Research by the Upwork Research Institute)

Capability uplift must be intentional and inclusive. For institutions, this means more than training. It means co-designing role transitions, supporting career pathways, and framing AI as a catalyst for professional reinvention as opposed to a straight-up threat.

"You're not going to lose your job to AI, but you're going to lose your job to someone who uses AI."

A participant quoted Jensen Huang, CEO of NVIDIA

* https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/

https://thefinancialbrand.com/news/artificial-intelligence-banking/deploy-ai-without-triggering-employee-alienation-and-burnout-180650

REIMAGINING LEARNING:

Curriculum, assessment, and capability

Embedding AI in curriculum and competency

AI is no longer a niche topic; it is a foundational capability. Students across disciplines, from nursing to law, will increasingly be expected to understand and work with AI tools as part of their professional practice.

- **Adjacency matters** – As discussed at the Ellucian sector focus group, embedding AI alongside disciplinary learning can create immediate value. For example, Professor Michael Blumenstein shared how speech pathology students are already using adjacent AI knowledge to enhance clinical placements.
- **AI as literacy** – Like writing or research, AI fluency should be treated as a core academic skill which is embedded across the curriculum, not siloed in technical electives.

This view is increasingly supported beyond the sector. A recent *Times Higher Education* article describes generative AI as a "boundary object" which is a concept that enables collaboration and shared understanding across disciplines, roles, and functions.[1] This reinforces the idea that AI is not confined to technical domains but is becoming a core capability across the academic landscape.

This shift mirrors patterns seen in other sectors. Organisations that invested broadly in digital capability, not just within technical teams, consistently saw stronger returns on transformation. For universities, the implication is clear: embedding AI across disciplines is not just a pedagogical imperative, but a strategic one.

1 https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/eight-ways-embrace-ais-flexibility-across-disciplines

AI literacy and judgement

As generative AI becomes embedded in learning environments, assessment strategies are shifting focus from evaluating what students produce to how they think. The emphasis is moving toward students' ability to select, apply, and interpret AI tools with discernment.

Key capabilities include:

CRITICAL THINKING

Understanding when and why to use AI

ETHICAL USE

Navigating boundaries of originality, attribution, and fairness

TOOL SELECTION

Choosing appropriate AI tools for specific tasks

INTERPRETATION

Evaluating the reliability and relevance of AI-generated content

This shift was a recurring theme in the Ellucian Sector Focus Group Roundtable where participants explored how assessment formats must evolve to reflect the realities of AI-enabled learning. Examples discussed included tasks requiring students to justify their choice of AI tools, reflect on how AI shaped their thinking, or critique the outputs they received.

These approaches move the focus from output to process, encouraging transparency, accountability, and deeper learning. The goal is not to eliminate AI from assessment, but to embed its use in ways that develop judgment. In doing so, universities can help students build the fluency they'll need in a world where AI is not optional, but foundational.

To build trust and clarity, institutions are adopting transparency practices such as:

- **Declaring AI use in grading** – Some universities, such as the University of Edinburgh, now inform students when AI is used in marking essays, ensuring fairness and clarity.[2]
- **Effective use of AI into the graded rubric** – Universities, such as the University of Newcastle in Australia, are assessing the student use of AI as part of a rounded evaluation process readying students for the real world where these tools will be ubiquitous by their time of graduation.
- **Notifying Students About AI Feedback** – Other institutions, such as the University of Birmingham, notify students when AI tools are used in providing feedback, enhancing understanding of the assessment process.[3]

At the roundtable, it was noted that, at UNSW, a staff-student ethics course on responsible AI use is helping to build shared understanding across the academic community. The course embeds ethical values alongside technical capability through structured discussions and case-based learning, fostering responsible practice and ethical awareness. This kind of initiative reflects a broader shift discussed at the Ellucian Sector Focus Group Roundtable, where participants emphasised the need to move beyond compliance and toward co-designed approaches that build trust, fluency, and confidence in AI use across academic roles.

Together, these developments show that generative AI is not only reshaping assessment but also prompting educators to rethink how they nurture critical, ethical, and reflective learners prepared for an AI-enabled future.

2 https://information-services.ed.ac.uk/computing/comms-and-collab/elm/guidance-for-working-with-generative-ai

3 https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/libraries/education-excellence/gai/principles-on-the-use-of-ai

Rethinking assessment in an AI-enabled environment

Generative AI is rapidly transforming the boundaries of traditional assessment in education. Students can now produce essays, code, and creative outputs (such as art, music, and multimedia projects) in seconds, fundamentally challenging longstanding assessment models and timelines. The sector's response cannot rely solely on detecting AI-generated content, especially as these tools become more sophisticated and harder to trace. Instead, as surfaced in the Ellucian Sector Focus Group Roundtable, the conversation is shifting toward intentional design, rethinking assessment formats to foster AI literacy, evaluate judgment, and promote transparency in how AI is used across the learning and teaching lifecycle.

Emerging Assessment Formats include:

ITERATIVE DRAFTS

Students submit multiple drafts that document how AI tools influenced their thinking and writing process. This approach, referenced during the Ellucian Sector Focus Group Roundtable, is already being adopted in some universities (like the University of Melbourne) and encourages reflection on the role of AI in learning.[4]

AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

Students complete real-world tasks (like pitching a product, conducting a mock interview, or solving a live case) that mirror professional scenarios and require applied judgment. These performance-based assessments evaluate how students do the job, not just what they know.[5]

REFLECTIVE JOURNALS

Students maintain journals that detail their use of AI tools and decision-making throughout assignments, helping educators assess not just the final product but also the process and ethical considerations. This model and others are discussed at length by Charles Stuart University.[6]

Faculty autonomy and pedagogical change

Academic freedom remains a cornerstone of higher education. However, the rise of AI introduces new tensions between the pressure to innovate and the fear of diminished quality, control, or disciplinary integrity.

This dynamic was a recurring theme in the Ellucian Sector Focus Group Roundtable, where participants reflected on the need to create space for experimentation without undermining trust or autonomy. The challenge is not whether to innovate, but how to do so in ways that respect academic judgment and foster shared ownership.

At the University of Melbourne, a strong emphasis has been placed on supporting academic-led, interdisciplinary AI research and innovation. The university funds initiatives such as the CAIDE Seed Funding for Automated Expertise, which is awarded through a competitive, peer-informed process that prioritises novelty, feasibility, and alignment with the university's research priorities.[7] This model enables researchers to experiment within trusted frameworks, supporting creativity while maintaining rigour, which mirrors the broader commitment to academic judgment and responsible AI experimentation. Together, these developments demonstrate how generative AI is prompting educators to rethink how they nurture critical, ethical, and reflective learners prepared for an AI-enabled future.

4 https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/ai-aai/home/ai-assessment?in_c=mega

5 https://research.monash.edu/en/publications/focusing-on-learning-through-constructive-alignment-with-task-ori

6 https://www.csu.edu.au/division/learning-teaching/assessments/assessment-and-artificial-intelligence/rethinking-assessments

7 https://www.unimelb.edu.au/caide/research-archive/2023-caide-seed-funding-automated-expertise

EQUITY AND INCLUSION:

Building a human-centred AI approach

AI has the potential to personalise learning at scale, but it also carries the risk of deepening existing inequities. Western Sydney University CIO Bianca Jordaan said:

"Some students don't have access to the tools, knowledge, or language."

This tension between opportunity and exclusion was a recurring theme in the roundtable.

Key equity risks include:

- Algorithmic bias embedded in AI models
- Unequal access to devices, connectivity, and digital literacy
- Over-automation of support, which can erode human connection where it's most needed.

Yet the opportunities are real:

- AI-powered chat can reduce wait times and support diverse learning needs
- Assistive technologies can expand accessibility for students with disability
- At Deakin, AI-enabled support has led to fewer requests for disability adjustments, as students can access help on their own terms.[8]

8 Comments from the Ellucian Sector Focus Group Roundtable.

To ensure AI supports rather than excludes, institutions must take a proactive approach. One practical step might be to adopt digital equity audits into AI planning and implementation, assessing who benefits, who is left out, and what adjustments are needed to redress this.

AI can also help personalise the learning journey, particularly for part-time students, first-in-family learners, and neurodiverse cohorts. Tools like Ellucian's Journey platform – which overlays curriculum, job market data, and personal goals – offer a glimpse into how individualised pathways might be designed at scale.

The lesson here is that, if you design for the margins, you improve the centre. Equity and personalisation are not competing goals. Rather, they are mutually reinforcing when AI is implemented with care.

GUARDRAILS AND GOVERNANCE:

Responsible AI at scale

The five pillars of responsible AI governance

Governance must evolve as AI becomes embedded across university systems, from SMSs to LMSs. The Ellucian Sector Focus Group Roundtable highlighted the need for institutions to move beyond ad hoc responses and toward coordinated, values-led frameworks that balance innovation with trust, transparency, and accountability.

Emerging governance practices include:

- **Cross-functional oversight** – Cross-functional, student-inclusive bodies that guide strategy and oversight, such as at Angelo State University[9]
- **Ethical guidelines** – Co-developed with staff and students, tailored to context, and embedded in everyday practice
- **Transparency protocols** – Clear declarations of AI use in learning, assessment, and communications
- **Risk-based tool classification** – Recognising that not all AI tools require the same level of scrutiny
- **Continuous feedback loops** – Mechanisms for appeal, reflection, and iterative improvement

ONLY **35%**
of institutions currently have **formal AI policies**

87%
plan to adopt one within 18 months*

(EDUCAUSE AI Landscape Study, 2024)

* https://www.educause.edu/research/2024/2024-educause-action-plan-ai-policies-and-guidelines

9 https://www.chieflearningofficer.com/2025/06/18/beyond-adoption-strategic-ai-leadership-from-campus-to-corporate/

From legacy data governance risk to trategic readiness

Data governance has emerged as a critical enabler of responsible adoption. The recent Ellucian Sector Focus Group Roundtable reveal urgent concerns around legacy data exposure, fragmented permissions, and the unintended consequences of activating AI within existing ecosystems.

Universities are confronting the reality that decisions made years ago, such as broadly permissive file-sharing settings or inconsistent metadata management, can now cause sensitive information to be inadvertently exposed once AI tools are activated. This is not merely a technical challenge. It is a strategic risk, with serious implications.

Other key challenges include:

- **Legacy architecture and permissions.** Many institutions operate on complex, layered IT systems, in which historical sharing settings are poorly documented or understood. Activating AI features like auto-tagging or summarisation risks exposing sensitive data broadly across the institution.
- **Lack of visibility and control.** Without robust governance frameworks, outdated or misclassified data can surface, compromising privacy and eroding stakeholder trust.
- **Fragmented oversight.** Governance responsibilities are often siloed across IT, legal, academic, and administrative departments, hampering coordinated and effective responses.

47% of executive leaders said their **institution is preparing data to be AI-ready**, indicating **active engagement with data governance** in the context of AI

(EDUCAUSE AI Landscape Study, 2024)

The Ellucian Sector Focus Group Roundtable made one thing clear: data governance is no longer just an IT concern. Instead, now, it's an institutional one, impacting student experience, institutional reputation, and demanding ethical leadership in the AI era.

"The moment we flick the switch and have it meta tag everything [...] decision you make maybe five to ten years ago [...] is impacting you today, the moment we turn AI on."

Luke Schiralli, Associate Director of Global & Controlled Entities, University of Wollongong

[#] https://www.educause.edu/ecar/research-publications/2024/2024-educause-ai-landscape-study/introduction-and-key-findings

Vendor partnerships and ethical procurement

As AI becomes increasingly embedded in core university platforms (such as Student Management Systems (SMSs) and Learning Management Systems (LMSs) institutions must move beyond passive adoption and actively shape the ethical contours of their digital infrastructure. This includes:

DEMANDING EXPLAINABILITY

Institutions must require vendors to provide transparent documentation of how AI models operate, especially when they influence student outcomes or automate decision-making.

REVIEWING PRIVACY, IP, AND MODEL BIAS

AI tools must be assessed for compliance with privacy laws, intellectual property protections, and bias mitigation strategies. As noted in the Ellucian Sector Focus Group Roundtable, legacy data exposure and poor historical permissions can surface unintended risks when AI is activated.

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN PROCUREMENT ETHICS

Students should be involved in evaluating the ethical implications of AI tools, particularly those that affect learning, assessment, or wellbeing. This builds trust and ensures relevance.

Lesson from fintech

As seen in the financial sector, institutions that failed to audit vendor models faced reputational damage when automated decisions led to discriminatory or harmful outcomes. Universities must learn from this and implement robust governance before deployment.

This imperative was echoed at the Ellucian Sector Focus Group Roundtable, where Luke Schiralli from the University of Wollongong warned that:

"Activating AI across office-based platforms (like Microsoft) could inadvertently expose sensitive data due to legacy sharing settings where decisions made years ago now carry new risks."

Similarly, Jodie Crawford, the Manager, Global and Controlled Entities at the University of Wollongong, emphasised the need for "trusted play areas" where staff can experiment safely before tools are scaled. For example, UNSW recently launched an Amazon Web Services (AWS) AI Sandbox to support experimentation and low-risk trial projects.[10]

10 https://www.unsw.edu.au/business/engage-with-us/unsw-sandbox-program

ONWARDS AND UPWARDS:

Sector-wide recommendations

Australian universities are well-positioned to lead in responsible AI adoption, but doing so requires moving decisively from experimentation to institutional transformation. Based on sector insights and roundtable reflections, six priority actions stand out:

1. **Anchor AI strategy in institutional purpose.**
   Align AI initiatives with the university's mission, whether widening participation, enhancing research impact, or improving student outcomes. As Nous Principal Zac Ashkanasy noted at the roundtable:

   "The real transformation lies in how institutions prepare their people, redesign their roles, and embed AI responsibly into their operating models."

2. **Establish cross-functional AI governance councils.**
   Create whole-of-university bodies that include academic, professional, legal, and student voices. These councils should guide AI strategy, oversee risk, and ensure transparency which echoes the call made during the roundtable discussion for thoughtful oversight before enabling AI across legacy systems.

3. **Audit roles and readiness for workforce change.**
   Conduct a structured review of how AI will reshape roles across academic and professional domains. As discussed during the roundtable, the shift is already underway so institutions must plan for reskilling, not just automation.

4. **Fund curriculum redesign,** not just compliance. Move beyond reactive policy updates. Invest in co-designed, discipline-specific approaches to AI in teaching and assessment. Participants at the Roundtable highlighted the value of safe spaces for experimentation and peer-led innovation.

5. **Launch an AI Commons (or sandbox) for shared experimentation.**
   Create a central hub for staff and students to explore AI tools, share use cases, and access training. This supports a culture of innovation and reduces duplication across faculties.

6. **Partner with students in co-designing services.**
   Involve students directly in shaping AI-enabled services, from chatbots to academic advising. As mentioned during the roundtable, student expectations are evolving fast, and trust is built through transparency and inclusion.

A few universities stand out for their strategic intent, experimentation, and commitment to student success. These institutions offer valuable models for others navigating similar challenges:

- **University of NSW (UNSW).** The university has developed a university-wide commitment to AI through its AI Institute. It is seeking to become a "recognised as world leader in the development of AI as a safe, reliable and ubiquitous technology for global benefit."[11]
- **Ohio State University (USA).** A recent entrant into the AI leadership space, Ohio State has announced a comprehensive AI strategy that spans research, teaching, and student experience. Its commitment to ethical governance and interdisciplinary collaboration makes it a university to watch.[12]
- **Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD).** SUTD has positioning itself as the world's first "Design AI" university. Rather than layering AI onto existing structures, it is embedding AI across disciplines, from engineering to architecture, with a strong focus on human-centred and ethical design. Its commitment to integrating AI as both a tool and a mindset across teaching and research makes it a compelling model for innovation-led institutions.[13]

11 https://www.unsw.edu.au/unsw-ai

12 https://news.osu.edu/ohio-state-launches-bold-ai-fluency-initiative-to-redefine-learning-and-innovation/

13 https://www.sutd.edu.sg/about/design-ai/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Conclusion: Shaping the future, not reacting to it

Artificial intelligence is a present force reshaping the foundations of higher education. But AI is not merely a tool. It is a transformation lever. The critical question is not whether institutions will adopt AI, but how and whether they do so with intention, integrity, and impact. As Professor George Siemens, the Director of the Centre for Change and Complexity in Learning at University of Adelaide, recently put it:

"The universities that are doing exceptionally well in terms of growth in student numbers, profile, student success, and other factors – almost all of them that come to mind are aggressive innovators. They're the ones who are updating their systems, trying to find new ways of doing things. Right now, not just the biggest, but the only question is 'What parts of the university are going to change as a result of AI?'"

The institutions that will define the next chapter of APAC Tertiary Education are those that lead with clarity of purpose, invest in capability, and centre human outcomes. They will scale AI not as a bolt-on, but as a catalyst for better learning, deeper engagement, and more equitable student success.

Those that delay may not be disrupted by the technology itself but by the rising expectations of their own students, staff, and communities.

This is the moment to act with purpose, courage, and care. The future will not wait. But it can still be shaped.

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