

Beyond Intelligent Automation: Reimagining Human-Centred Futures for Digital Education

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The Open University (UK)

2nd Annual Public Lecture Series

BEYOND STANDARD SCRIPTS

IMAGINING NEW FUTURES IN DIGITAL EDUCATION



If universities were invented today—not 900 years ago, not even 50 years ago—but today, in a world of artificial intelligence, would they look anything like the institutions we currently have?



Bologna



Oxford University



Source: Weiming Xie/Alamy

What is education actually for...



Bologna



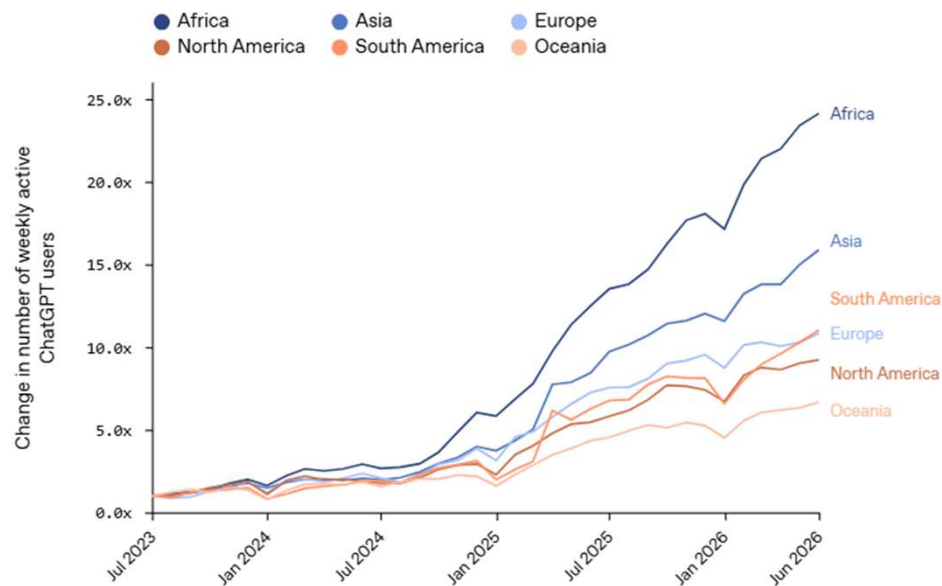
Oxford University



Source: Weiming Xie/Alamy

The question is not whether AI will change higher education. It already has.

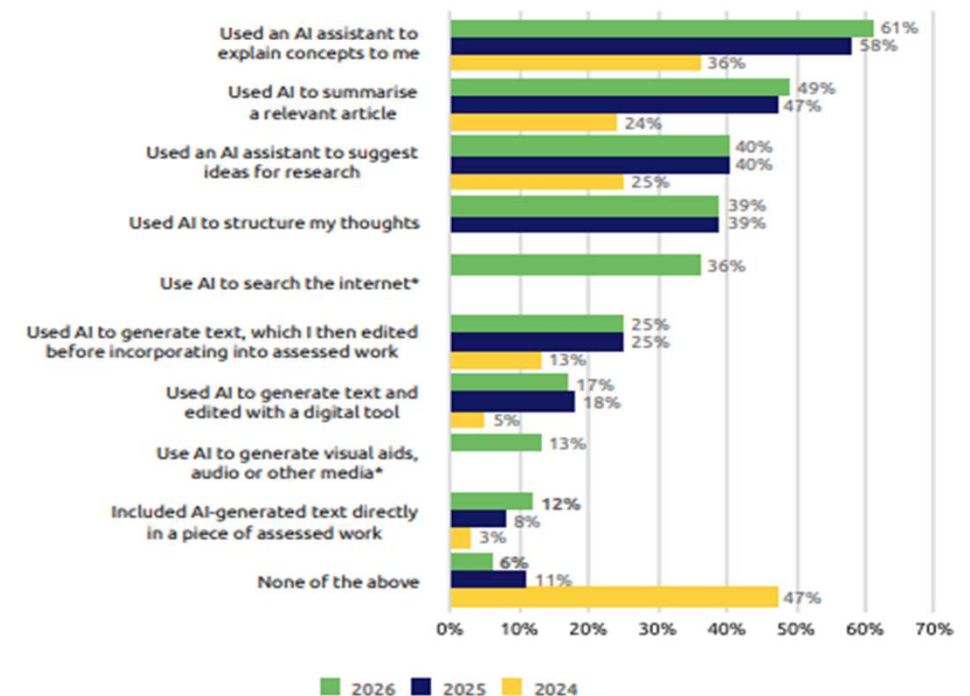
ChatGPT adoption has grown fastest in Africa and Asia



Each series plots the change in the number of weekly active ChatGPT users in each region relative to the baseline rate for that region in July 2023. Users are considered active if they have sent a message in the seven days before the start of each month. Countries in which ChatGPT does not operate are excluded, as are users under 18 years of age.

Source: OpenAI, 30 June 2026 <https://openai.com/index/how-chatgpt-adoption-has-expanded/>

Figure 4: 'When thinking about using generative AI to prepare assessed work, which of the following have you ever done?'



Source: Stephenson, R., & Armstrong, C. (2026). Student Generative AI Survey 2026. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/student-generative-ai-survey-2026/>

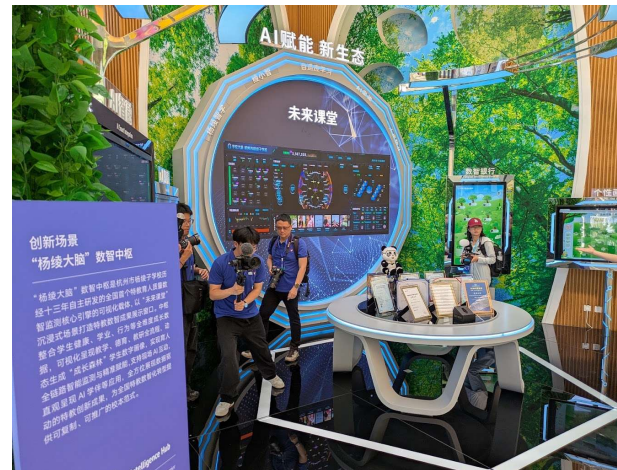
The real question is: who gets to shape that future of higher education?

Will it be technology companies, governments, universities, educators, or learners themselves?



 OpenAI

 Gemini



Institute of Education Technology: 50+ years young



AI, Learning Analytics & Design

Innovation in online and distance learning, teaching and assessment at the intersection of AI, Learning Analytics, and Learning Design.



Digital Education for Sustainability

Researching digital education that supports informed decision-making and action in response to the climate crisis.



Digital Participation, Social Justice and Equitable Learning

Enabling community engagement and participation in scientific research through innovative technologies and methodologies with the aim to develop critical literacies, impact policy and foster social justice.



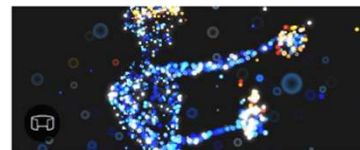
Digital Wellbeing, Health and Learning

Innovating at the intersection of digital health, wellbeing and learning for improved health outcomes.



Future of Work and Professional Development

A cross-university team led by IET, exploring how education, work, and technology intersect, preparing learners and professionals for AI-shaped futures.



Immersive, Inclusive and Embodied Learning

Exploring immersive, and spatial technologies to augment human learning and intelligence, embed skills in context, and advance equitable and inclusive learning futures.



Open Education Research Hub

Learning from worldwide perspectives on the technologies, ecosystems, practices and values shaping openness in education.



iet.open.ac.uk

High-quality higher education should be available to anyone, regardless of their background, previous qualifications, age, or location.



The Open University

Leading global distance learning, delivering high-quality education to anyone, anywhere, anytime



Largest
University
in Europe

51% part-time
undergraduates
taught by OU in UK

199,391 students



no formal
entry
requirements



34%
enter with one
A-level or less

28%

live in most
deprived areas

35%

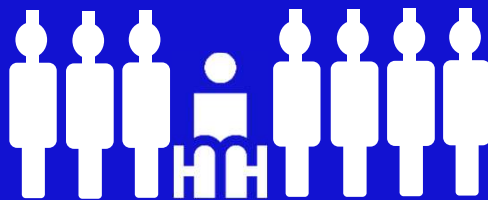
of new
undergraduates
are under 25+

73 %

FTSE 100 have
sponsored staff on OU
courses in 2022/23

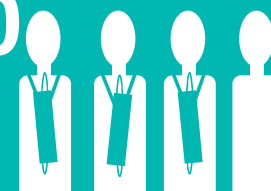
18%

Open University students
has a disability (36,400)



7 in 10

students are
already in work



2,800

employers use
OU learning
solutions to
develop
workforce





And now AI is supposed to transform learning



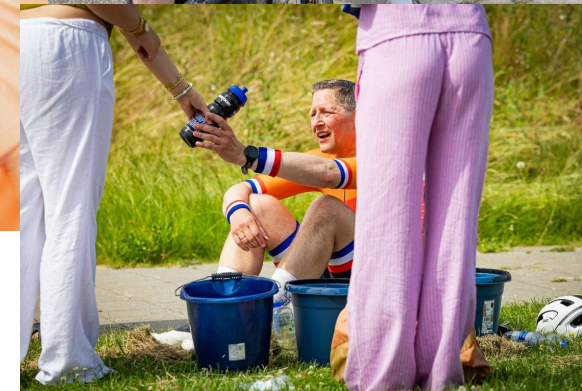
People still need encouragement (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

People still need feedback (Hattie, 2009).

People still need belonging (Glass & Westmont, 2014).

People still need purpose.

And perhaps most importantly, people still need other people (Siemens, 2005).



For the **first time in history**, students have access to systems that can explain concepts, answer questions, generate examples, provide feedback, assist with writing, and offer support twenty-four hours a day (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2023; Giannakos et al., 2025; Rienties et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2024).

Figure 3. Introductory video of i-AIDA featuring an avatar explaining the functionalities.

Table 2 Four services that students expect an AI digital assistant to have for teaching and learning (1–5)

	Mean	SD	% agree
<i>Real-time Assistance and Query Resolution:</i> Having 24/7 support from AI digital assistant for academic queries and guidance	4.25	1.04	87
<i>Personalisation and Accessibility:</i> AIDA to be personalised to individual needs and learning approaches, including those with disabilities or specific learning requirements.	4.13	1.48	75
<i>Support for Academic Tasks:</i> AI assisting with academic activities like summarising key points from study materials, providing feedback on assignments, helping with grammar and writing, and offering study resources.	3.88	1.12	62
<i>Emotional and Social Support:</i> AIDA provides emotional support or motivation if needed, especially in the context of distance learning or for students with social anxieties.	3.25	1.28	50

n = 8, α = 0.686.

“I think 24/7 support would be good because we all work at very different times. And what I would be expecting is related to the course material. So, if I had a question on “where would I find information on the [X]”, [AI] would give me links to where I could find this information, so that I'm not going at the tutor all the time and saying where can I find this?” (I09, 17:36)

“The very first basic service that I would like to have is finding sources, the other one, and to me this is one of my main usages of AI, I'm not a native and English speaker, writing documentation, even for my work, sometimes looking at essays, I'm really not 100% confident about my grammar. I would like the AI to tell me what I'm doing wrong, and how can I do better” (I03, 16:55).

It could allow me to see what I understand or not in the course, so I can revise/investigate the subject more in depth. It could be a good way to revise—but to do that, the questions need to be written clearly. (S2_80, Female, PG, Health and Social Care)



Table 3 Concerns about use of AI in education (1-5)

	Mean	SD	% agree
<i>Academic Integrity</i> : potential misuse of AI for completing assignments, potential plagiarism, and academic integrity	4.38	0.74	87
<i>Operational challenges</i> : how AI might inadvertently affect learning outcomes and student interaction, and the importance of ensuring that AI tools are accurate and reliable	4.25	0.71	87
<i>Ethical and social implications</i> : the potential impact of AI on learning processes and the necessity of balancing technological advancement with human-centric educational practices, keeping the human (student/tutor/academic staff) in the process, being able to talk to a human	4.13	0.84	75
<i>Data privacy and use</i> : how student data and inputs to the AI are used, stored, and potentially shared, emphasizing the need for transparency and consent	4.13	0.84	75
<i>Future of education</i> : how AI integration might change the nature of education and assessments, necessitating a shift in teaching methods and learning expectations	4.00	0.76	75

n = 8, $\alpha = 0.687$.

“My biggest concern with all the usage of the AI and also how much we are looking to the AI as a tool that can really help us not as a tool that is just replacing humans... Talking with a computer but believing I am talking with a human, I think it is very concerning. (IO3: 10:28)

“I’m someone who worked as a financial controller for many years, and you start to automatically look for financial efficiencies. Could you replace people with essentially avatars and chat bots? Which is scary! [A] lot of people would need retraining and a lot of different things, which does worry me. I think about my children and what kind of world they need to train for when they are older. (IO8, 24:44)

I thought university was about studying, researching, discovering things that matter to me and my way of learning. Not about asking a bot for answers or even a path to them. (S3_066, Male, level 1, Computing)

Learners at the OUUK mostly worry about trust. Can they trust what the system tells them? Can they trust how their data is used? Can they trust the institutions deploying these technologies? ([Rienties et al., 2026](#); [Rienties et al., 2024](#); [Rienties et al., 2025](#))

Predictions

25

Export

Select columns +

Student Information			Next TMA predictions Generated: 16/02/22 (233 days ago) Week: 20			Tutorial Attendance			Long term predictions Generated: 16/02/22 (264 days ago) Week: 16		
Student ID	Name	TMA	Submission	Risk of NS	Grade	Tutorial Attendance	Completion	Passing			
A000000X	Angie Olski	100 100 100 100	Not Submit		Not Submit	No tutorial booking for this student	71-80%	61-70%			
A000000X	Evan Brakus	100 100 100 100	Not Submit		Not Submit	No tutorial booking for this student	91-100%	91-100%			
A000000X	Robert Collins	100 100 100 100	Not Submit		Not Submit	No tutorial booking for this student	61-70%	61-70%			
A000000X	Jeanie Nikolaus	100 100 100 100	Submit		Pass 2	No tutorial booking for this student	91-100%	91-100%			
A000000X	Macey Donnelly	100 100 100 100	Not Submit		Not Submit	No tutorial booking for this student	51-60%	31-40%			
A000000X	Korey Lehner	100 100 100 100	Submit		Pass 2	No tutorial booking for this student	71-80%	61-70%			
A000000X	Fernando Greenfelder	100 100 100 100	Not Submit		Not Submit	No tutorial booking for this student	51-60%	51-60%			
A000000X	Victor Nikolaus	100 100 100 100	Submit		Pass 2	No tutorial booking for this student	91-100%	91-100%			
A000000X	Al Hill	100 100 100 100	Not Submit		Not Submit	No tutorial booking for this student	61-70%	61-70%			
A000000X	David Reynolds	100 100 100 100	Submit		Pass 2	No tutorial booking for this student	91-100%	91-100%			
A000000X	Nicholas Roberts	100 100 100 100	Submit		Pass 2	No tutorial booking for this student	91-100%	91-100%			
A000000X	Vernon Mante	100 100 100 100	Submit		Pass 3	No tutorial booking for this student	41-50%	41-50%			
A000000X	Adaline Robel	100 100 100 100	Submit		Pass 3	No tutorial booking for this student	91-100%	91-100%			
A000000X	Sallie Kuhlert	100 100 100 100	Not Submit		Not Submit	No tutorial booking for this student	00-10%	00-10%			
A000000X	Vivien Grimes	100 100 100 100	Submit		Pass 2	No tutorial booking for this student	81-90%	81-90%			
A000000X	Reyes Bergnaum	100 100 100 100	Submit		Pass 2	No tutorial booking for this student	91-100%	81-90%			
A000000X	Florine Schmeler	100 100 100 100	Submit		Pass 4	No tutorial booking for this student	41-50%	41-50%			
A000000X	Fermin Turp	100 100 100 100	Not Submit		Not Submit	No tutorial booking for this student	81-90%	81-90%			
A000000X	Earlene Prosacco	100 100 100 100	Not Submit		Not Submit	No tutorial booking for this student	61-70%	61-70%			
A000000X	Emil Kihn	100 100 100 100	Submit		Pass 2	No tutorial booking for this student	81-90%	81-90%			
A000000X	Morris Kreiger	100 100 100 100	Not Submit		Not Submit	No tutorial booking for this student	00-10%	00-10%			
A000000X	Pedro Gleichner	100 100 100 100	Submit		Pass 2	No tutorial booking for this student	71-80%	61-70%			
A000000X	Casper Gibson	100 100 100 100	Not Submit		Not Submit	No tutorial booking for this student	71-80%	61-70%			
A000000X	Harguerite McLaughlin	100 100 100 100	Not Submit		Not Submit	No tutorial booking for this student	41-50%	31-40%			
A000000X	Noah Swift	100 100 100 100	Not Submit		Not Submit	No tutorial booking for this student	61-70%	51-60%			

If education were merely about transferring information, libraries would have replaced universities centuries ago.

AiDA is an AI Digital Assistant designed to assist you in your educational journey. **Enable AiDA** ☒

AI Digital Assistant - 2

Hi, this is "Let's Chat!" I'm here to assist you with "OU Ready", an Open University, UK course. I'm like your friendly guide to help you get comfy with studying at a distance, finding your way around the OU websites, and getting the most out of your first steps with us. Think of me as your study buddy who keeps things simple and positive.

Here are some questions you might want to ask me:

1. What can I expect from studying at a distance with the OU?
2. How do I find my way around the StudentHome website?
3. Where can I find help if I get stuck?
4. What activities are included in Unit 1, and how long do they take?
5. How can I reflect on my study goals?

So, what would you like to chat about first?

Sources

Send a message...

What kinds of human capabilities become more important when intelligent machines become more capable?

In many ways, the rise of AI may make our uniquely human qualities more important rather than less important.

Curiosity. Creativity. Empathy. Ethical judgement. Resilience.

The most important decisions facing higher education are not technical. They are human.

- How do we use AI to expand opportunity rather than deepen inequality?
- How do we ensure that innovation strengthens rather than weakens trust?
- How do we create systems that enhance human flourishing rather than merely optimise performance?
- And perhaps most importantly, how do we ensure that learners remain at the centre of the future we are building?



Because ultimately, the future of higher education will not be determined by the intelligence of our machines.

It will be determined by the wisdom with which we choose to use them.

Suggested Q&A Discussion Prompts

- What should remain uniquely human in higher education?
- Should universities build their own AI ecosystems?
- How can we balance innovation, trust and inclusion?
- What skills should graduates develop in an AI world?
- How do we ensure AI reduces rather than increases inequality?



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