

TCS higher education study

Digital readiness and student experience
UK key findings report

February 2026



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Executive summary

The TCS Higher Education Study examines how universities in the UK are responding to shifting student expectations, enrollment trends, and digital transformation. Findings from the study indicate strong institutional optimism—yet reveal persistent barriers that slow organizational progress toward modern, student-centric, technology-enabled experiences and sustainable growth.

The research uncovers insights around:



Overall institutional outlook



Top strategic challenges



Digital maturity & pain points



Student experience & engagement



Investment priorities



Strategic recommendations for UK universities



Topics



Institutional health

How do education leaders perceive their institution's current state, and what factors are driving their optimism or concerns about future growth?



Digital student experience

What is the current state of digital student experience across university services, and what pain points do institutions prioritize addressing through technology implementations?



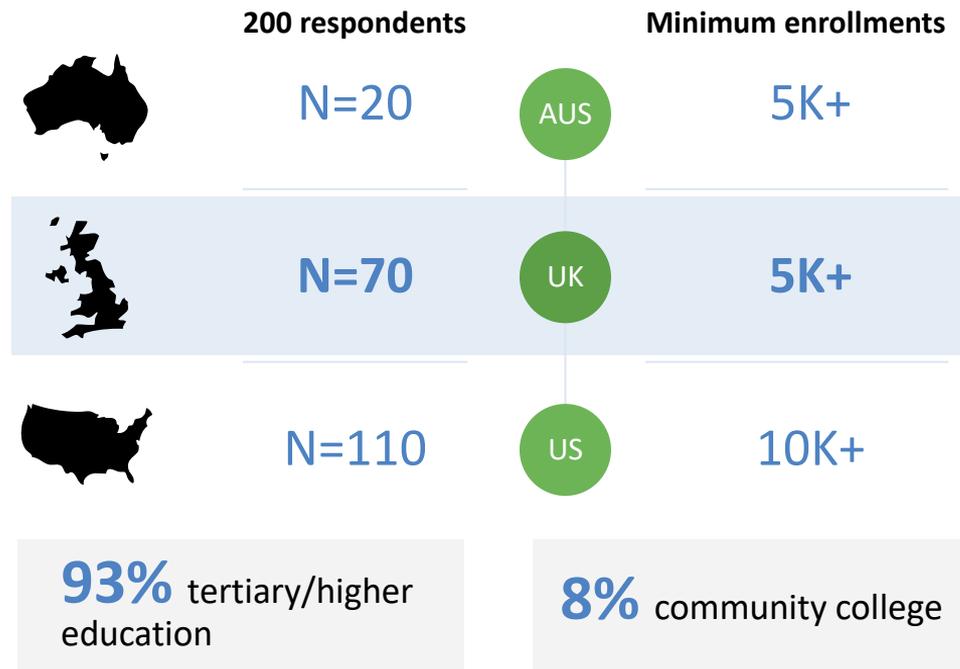
Technology investment priorities

Where are universities allocating their technology budgets, and what barriers are preventing them from adopting new technologies to enhance student experiences?

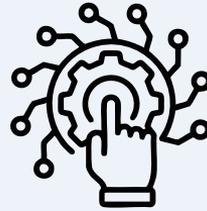
New TCS higher education study reveals trends in digital readiness & student experience



200 respondents in AUS, UK, and USA



Study shows most UK universities are optimistic about their future

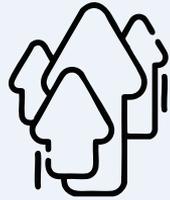


77%



are optimistic about long-term growth, reflecting strong momentum in enrollment, innovation, & digital transformation

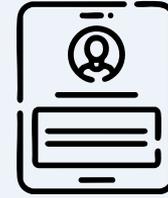
UK enrollments have steadily increased since 2022



81%



say their enrollment is
trending upward since 2022



19%



is the average increase
in enrollment*

*For those institutions with increased enrollment

And most universities remain confident about future enrollments



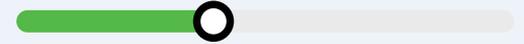
48%



are continuing to thrive in enrollments, signaling strong student demand



52%

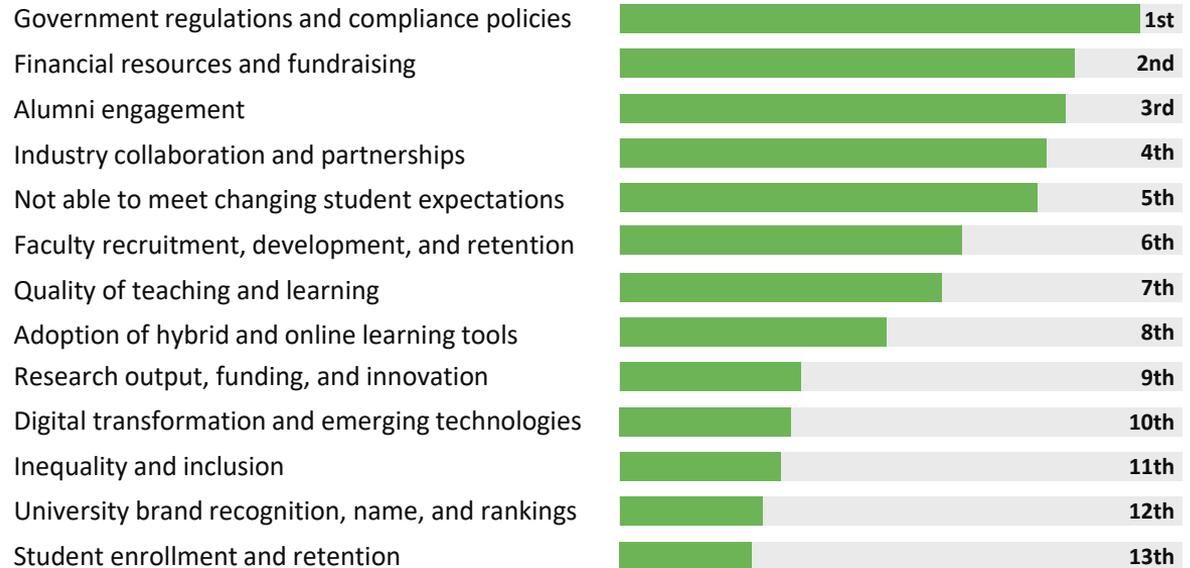


have room to improve

UK universities say their biggest challenges are regulations, financial resources, and alumni engagement



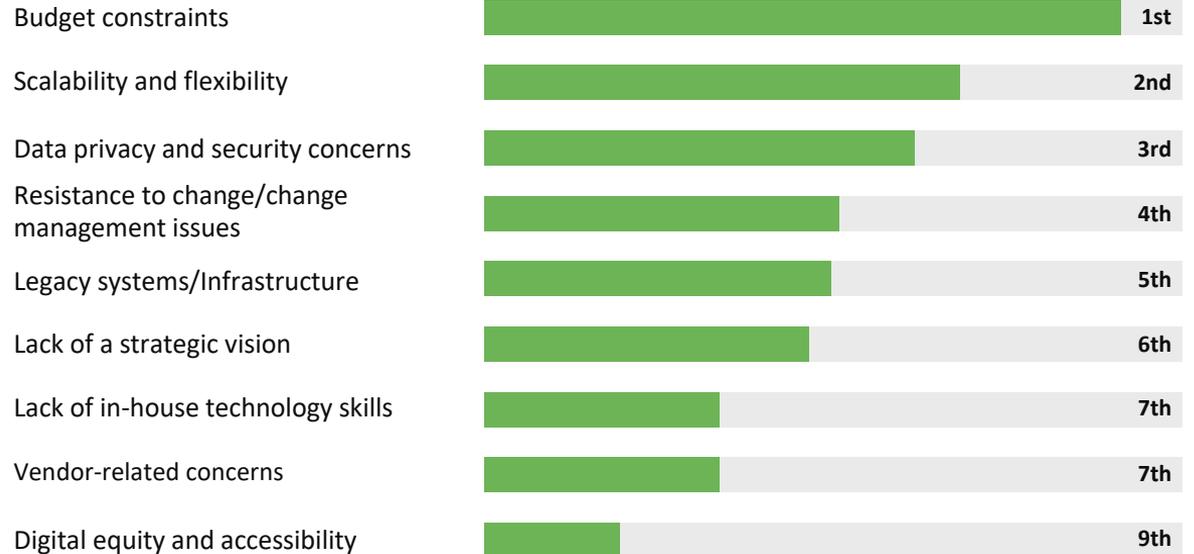
Top challenges shaping university's direction



The biggest barriers to adopting new technologies in UK universities? Budget, lack of scalability, and data privacy & security



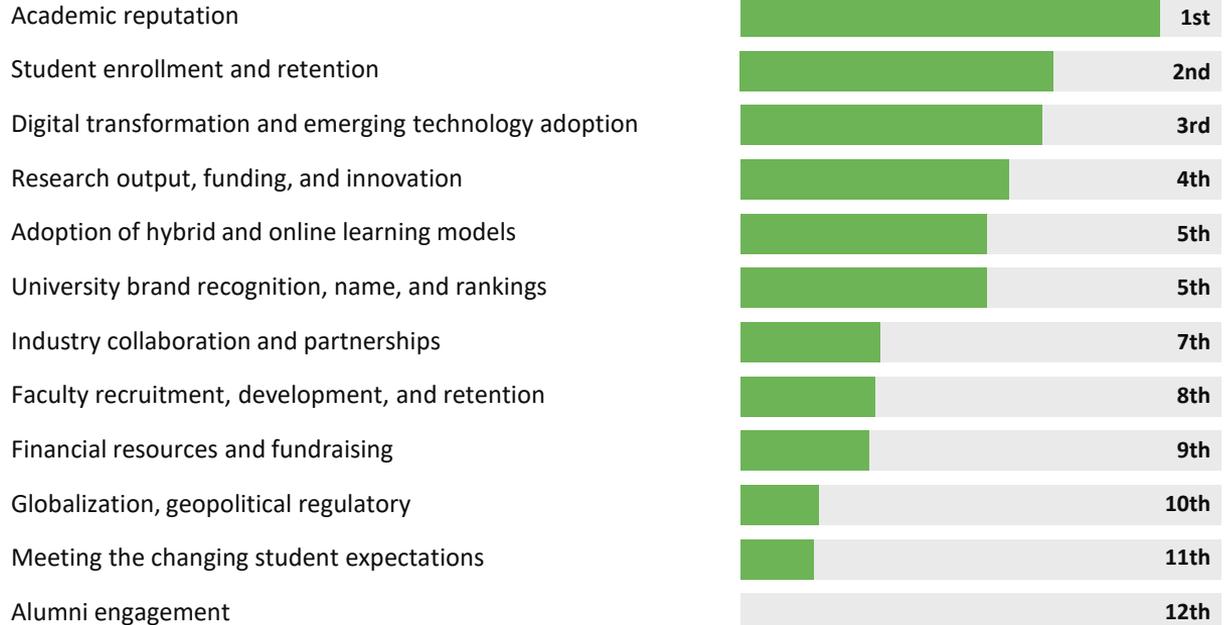
Rankings of top three barriers to new technology adoption



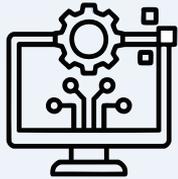
Academic reputation, student enrollment & retention, and digital transformation are biggest drivers of growth



Rank top 3 drivers of growth currently shaping your university's direction



UK universities are embracing AI and digital transformation—but not fast enough



66%



rate their overall digital proficiency as "evolving" or "basic"



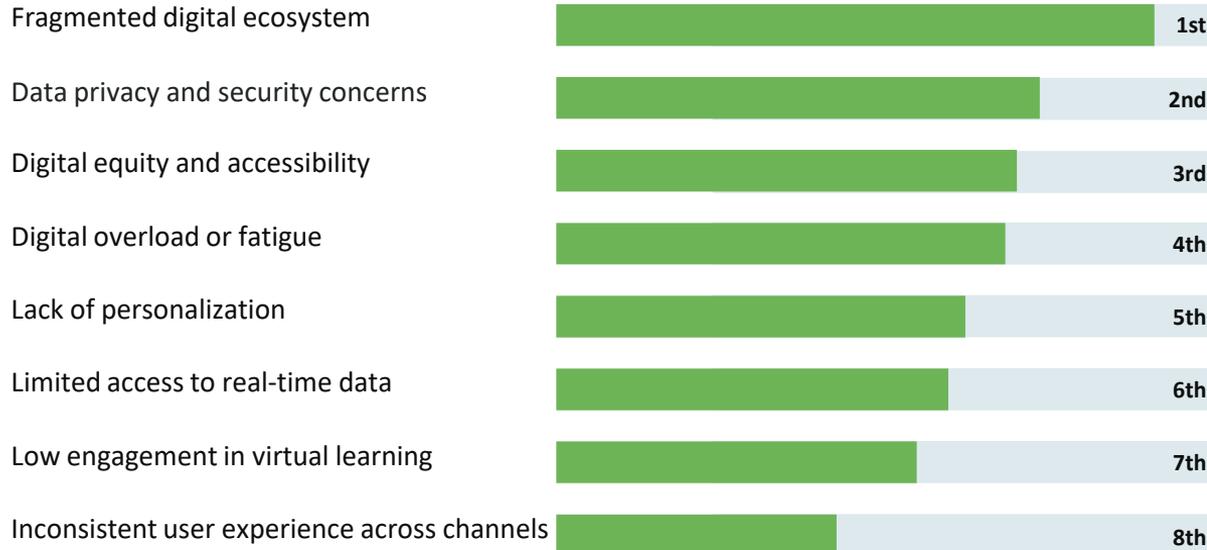
59%



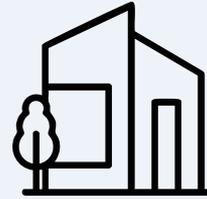
rate their maturity of digital student experiences as "evolving" or "basic"

Fragmented digital ecosystems are negatively impacting student experiences in the UK

Fragmented digital ecosystems, data privacy & security, and digital equity issues rank as top digital pain points



Over half of UK universities claim a strong innovation strategy

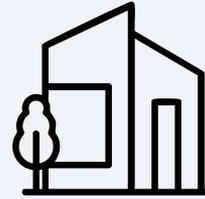


55%



say they are thriving when it comes to innovation, reflecting momentum toward modernization—the other half is still catching up

Yet significant gaps remain in fully leveraging technology to drive organizational responsiveness & agility in UK universities



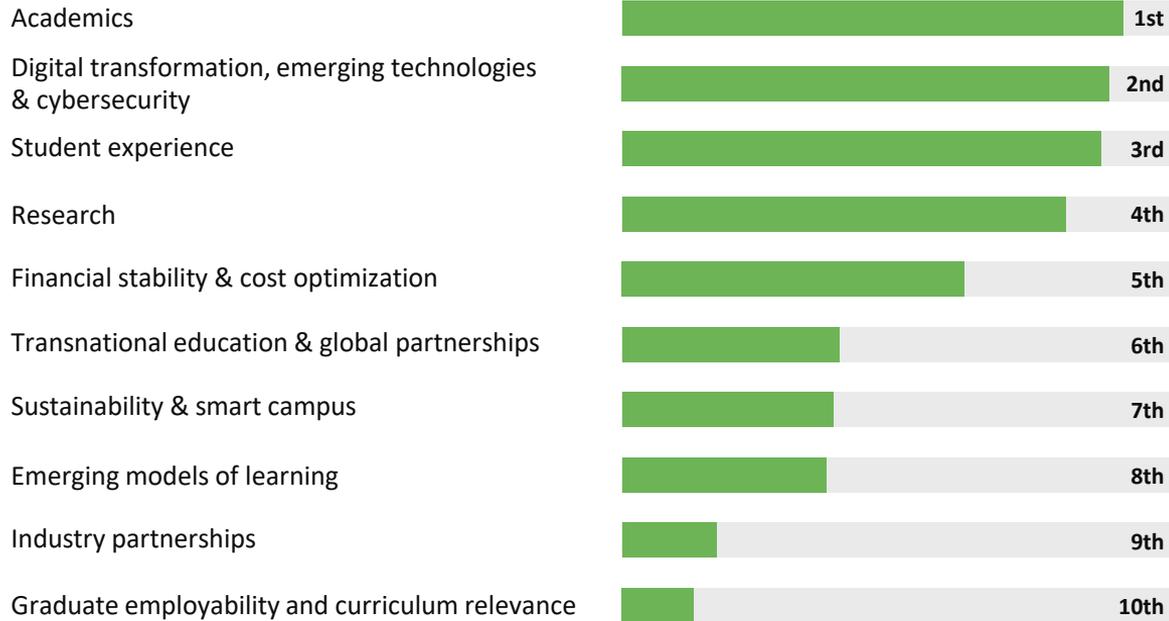
Only
30%



say technology is core enabler to organizational responsiveness and adaptability, showcasing the need for universities to explore and better understand its potential

Academics, digital transformation, and student experiences are strategic priorities for UK universities

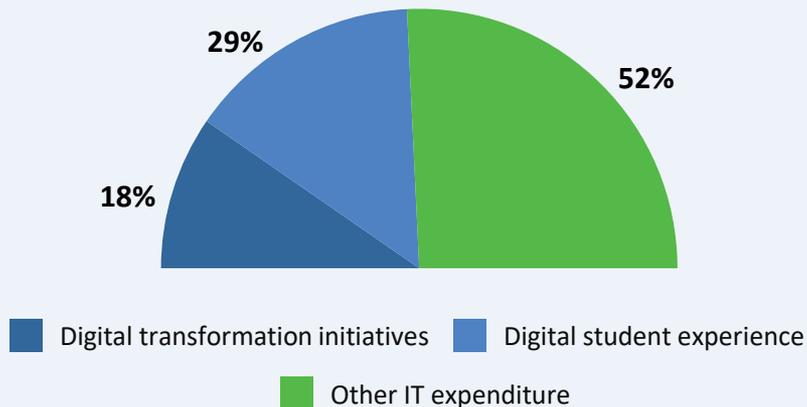
Top strategic priorities for the next two years



UK universities are allocating nearly half of IT budgets (47%) to digital initiatives



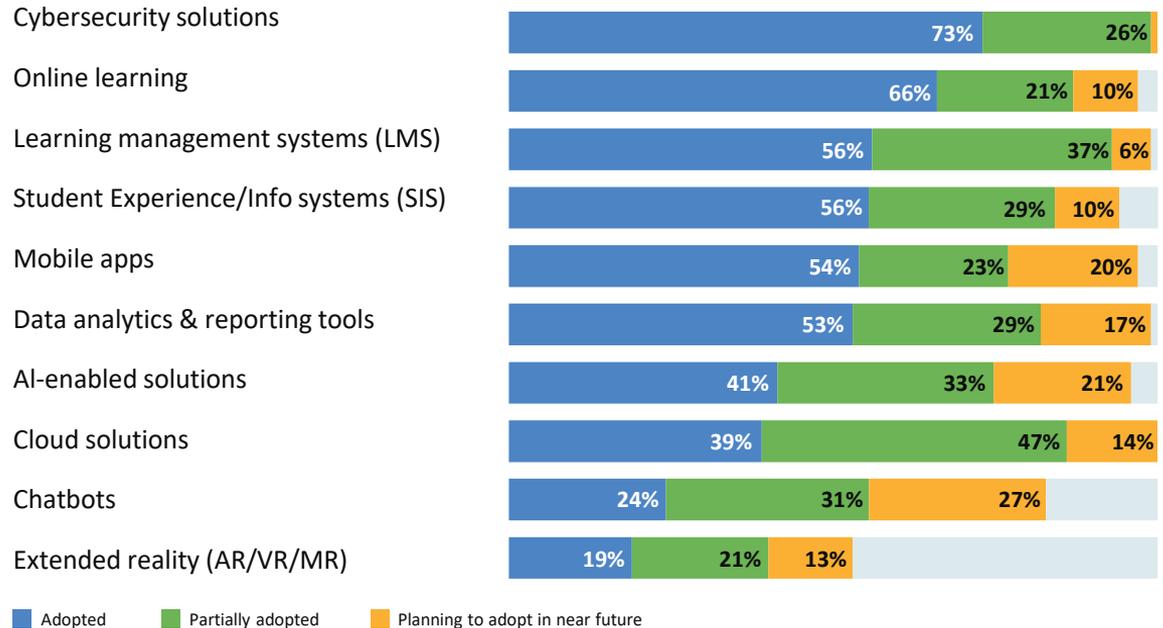
Universities are allocating 29% to digital student experiences and 18% to digital transformation efforts



Nearly three-quarters of UK universities have already adopted cybersecurity solutions to enhance student experiences



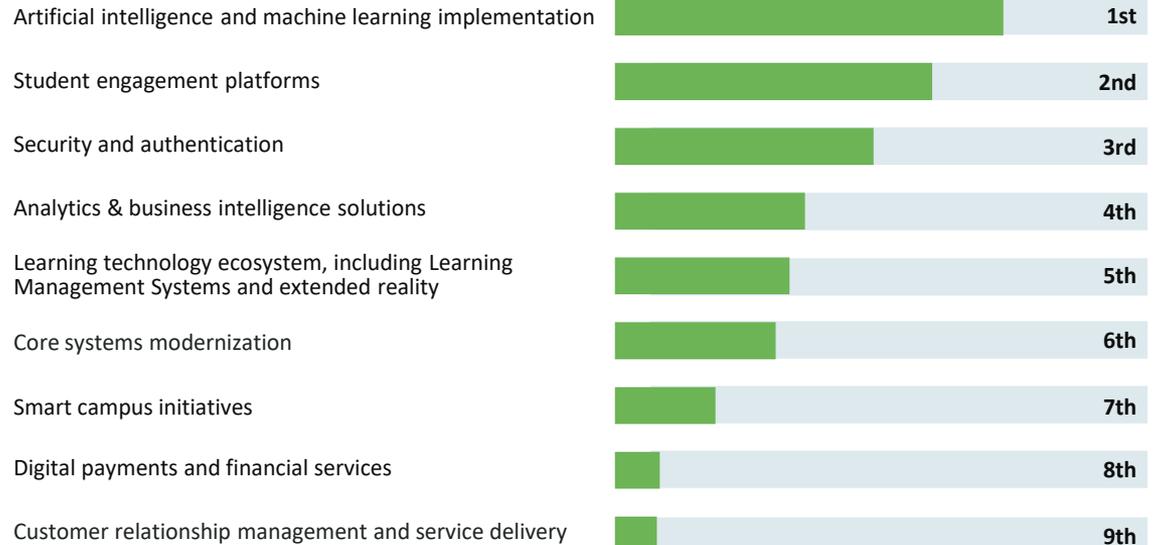
Digital technologies adopted to improve the student experience



AI is the top future investment priority in the UK for even better digital student experiences



Top investment priorities in the next two years for student digital experiences

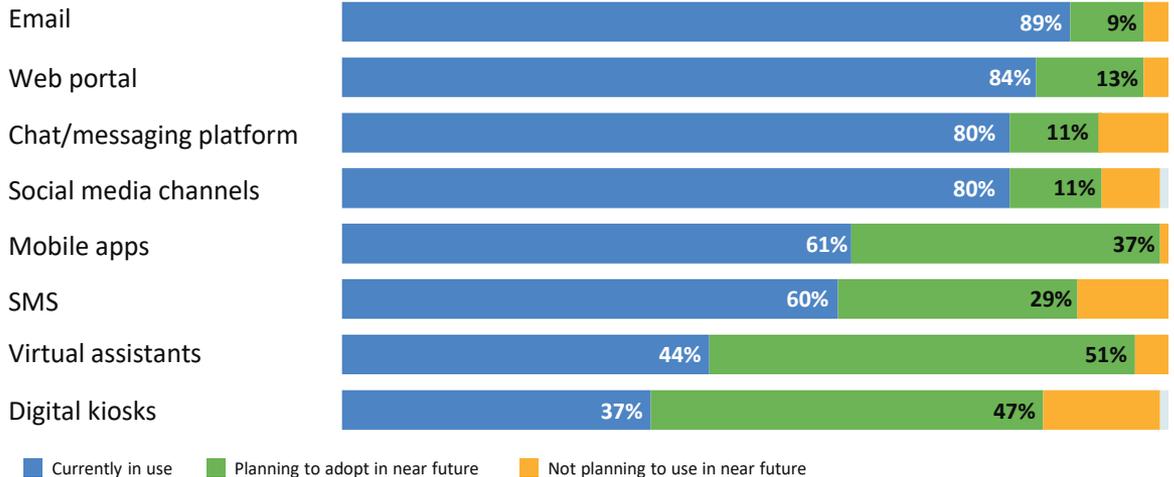


Yet legacy approaches still dominate in the UK, even in the age of AI



At 89%, email remains the top student communication channel, showing persistent reliance on traditional channels

Only 44% currently use virtual assistants, despite growing expectations for AI-enhanced student support



Charting the future: Strategic imperatives for higher education

The top recommendations, based on our research and expertise in the education sector, universities need to:



Develop a clear digital strategy focusing on high-impact use cases.



Redefine the student experience by creating seamless, personalized journeys.



Boost IT investments in digital transformation, AI/ML, and student engagement platforms to deliver interactive experiences.



Create a culture of innovation to meet rising student expectations, keep pace with change, and improve competitive positioning.



Monitor ROI and outcomes by tracking impact of AI/ML investments on student success, retention rates, and operational efficiency. Use these insights to adjust strategies dynamically—ensuring decisions remain data-driven and aligned with long-term objectives.

Thank you

