DIGITAL EDUCATION COUNCIL

When Change is the Only Constant

Key Insights and Next Steps from the DEC Global Summit 2025

When Change is the Only Constant

The 2nd Digital Education Council (DEC) Global Summit hosted at The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology brought together 200 higher education leaders from 82 member institutions across 25 countries. This gathering marked a critical moment for global higher education as institutions confront rapid AI-driven transformation.

The Summit was organised around four pillars:

- Defining Change
- Implementing Change
- Teaching Change
- Measuring Change

Sessions explored the future of higher education and work development, strengthening governance, redesigning assessment, embedding AI literacy, and building flexible, skills-aligned curriculum.

This report synthesises insights generated across two days of open debates, panel discussions, live polling, and keynotes. Conversations were transcribed, organised into key themes, and analysed to identify key patterns, examples, challenges, and recommendations raised by participants.

The analysis combines real-time inputs from delegates with curated summaries of expert-led discussions. The document consists of 4 sections:

Defining Change discusses how the future of higher education is being shaped by AI disruption, evolving educational models, and the changing role of institutions in an AI-driven world.

Implementing Change highlights the need for institutions to transition from fragmented efforts to unified AI roadmaps, with a focus on decentralising innovation and empowering faculty and students to lead the transformation.

Teaching Change talks about the ongoing evolution of educators and how to foster critical thinking, creativity, and human-centered skills in the new era of Higher Education.

Measuring Change shares new institutional success metrics that focus on long-term adaptability, social mobility, and the ability to evolve with technological advancements.

This document serves as both reflection of the sector's collective thinking and a practical guide for institutions navigating AI-driven transformation.

Defining Change

Leaders see 2025 as the start of a genuine transformation—one that redefines the purpose of institutions, accelerates new delivery models, reshapes assessment, and expands learner agency and personalisation.

But this shift is unfolding amid profound ambiguity about AI's trajectory.

Institutions are split between fearing they may underestimate AI's speed and fearing they may overestimate its impact. Faculty hesitation reflects this uncertainty, which serves as a useful signal: wherever students or staff hesitate, it points to governance, capability, or training gaps that need urgent attention.

Figure 1. Key Expected Changes in Higher Education

Question: Imagine that we are in 2035, what would we say 2025 was the beginning of?

Major AI Disruption Across Society	Institutions anticipate a future where AI is ubiquitous, and embedded in daily decision-making.
The Reinvention of Traditional Higher Education Models	Leaders foresee the erosion of traditional degrees as the primary credential. New modular learning, delivery formats and alternative providers will reshape how education is structured and consumed.
Transformation of Learning and Learners	Students are using AI to personalise their learning, iterate more quickly, and bypass poorly designed tasks. This signals a shift in cognitive behaviour shaped by continuous AI interactions.
The Institutional Realignment and AI Governance	Leaders are expecting a shift in organisational structures, driven by clearer AI policies, and governance frameworks.
The Redesign of Work and Workforce	Leaders are expecting a workforce where integrated human–AI decision-making, lifelong learning and continuous reskilling become essential

Beyond the anticipated future shifts, panellists highlighted four changes that institutions are currently undergoing:

1. Strategic alignment replaces experimentation. Institutions are moving from fragmented pilots to coherent AI roadmaps, linking ethics, infrastructure, and pedagogy under unified governance models.

2. Cultural renewal is underway. The most progressive institutions are decentralising innovation by empowering students, junior academics, and administrative teams while addressing fear and knowledge gaps among faculty to build trust and shared ownership.

3. Teaching and assessment are rebalancing. Graduate readiness now depends on three intertwined competencies: domain expertise, AI/digital literacy, and human creativity and judgement. Assessments are being redesigned to capture how students apply these together in real contexts.

4. Humanity becomes the differentiator. As AI commodifies content and technical output, universities are reaffirming the enduring value of empathy, ethics, and critical reflection by focusing on how students think and act, not just what they can produce.

AI is accelerating the personalisation of learning and broadening the accessibility of knowledge, yet its rise also amplifies deeper questions about higher education's meaning and accessibility. Institutions must redefine their worth not as gatekeepers of knowledge but as cultivators of wisdom and human capability.

Figure 2. Key Assumptions to be challenged

Question: What is one thing that we might be completely wrong about right now?

Misjudging the Pace and Power of AI	Leaders are divided between believing AI is overhyped ("it's just a glorified search engine") and fearing they are underestimating its speed and impact.
Wrong Assumptions About Learning and Learners	Many institutions assume students misuse AI or learn less because of it, while others assume students want AI-integrated learning. Both assumptions may be wrong.
Misreading the Future of Higher Education	Some believe AI will strengthen the value of residential education, others foresee an existential crisis for the sector.
Misunderstanding Human-AI Relationship	There is a risk of overestimating what AI can replace and underestimating what humans uniquely provide. Leaders warn that judgement, meaning-making, identity, and social norms are far more resilient than current narratives suggest.

Across sessions, it became clear that many assumptions shaping institutional strategy may be more fragile than they appear. Leaders hold vastly different views on the pace of AI, the future of learning, and the relevance of traditional models, meaning institutions may be planning for radically different futures.

Until assumptions are tested, institutions risk planning too cautiously or optimistically, basing strategies on narratives that may not hold as AI evolves. Emerging student behaviours and shifting cognitive patterns challenge old beliefs, while the balance between human judgment and AI remains uncertain.

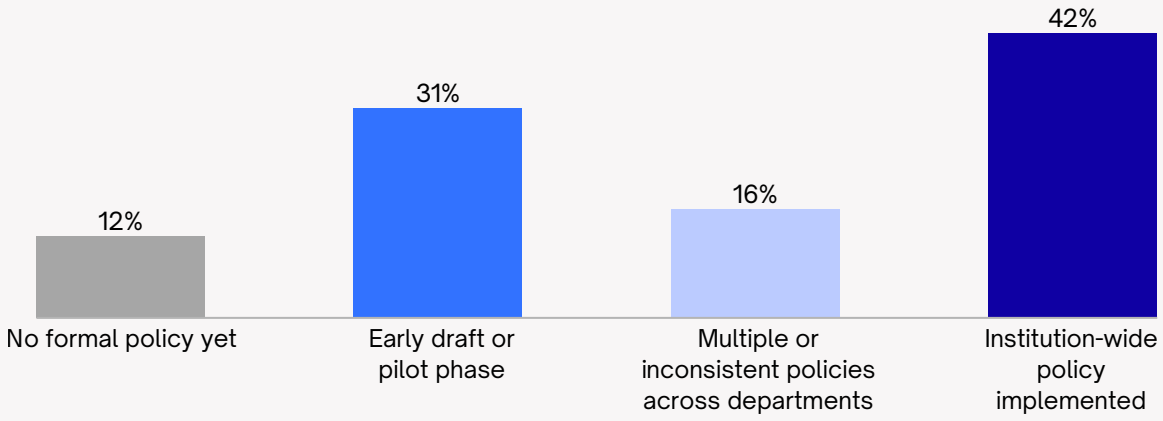
Implementing Change

Across the sessions, a clear message emerged: implementing AI-driven transformation in higher education is not about speed but about sequenced, sustained change. Institutions that balance urgency with reflection achieve deeper, more stable progress. Leadership alignment, ethical guardrails, and cultural readiness proved more decisive than technology itself.

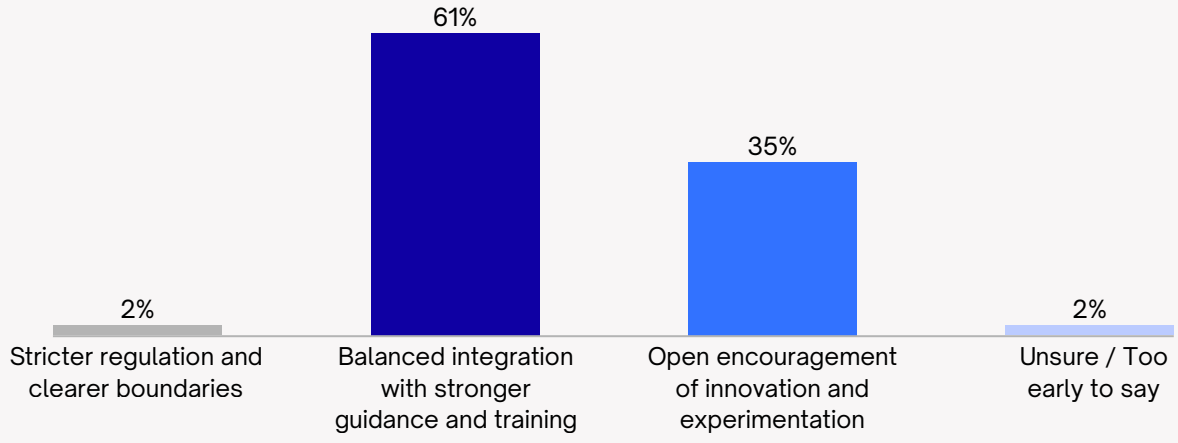
Panellists mentioned that at its best, change in institutions happens through structured adaptability: fast pilots paired with slow thinking. The institutions that are thriving have moved from viewing AI as a set of tools to seeing it as a catalyst for institutional learning. This means building governance that connects AI strategy with pedagogy, policy, and professional development while treating experimentation not as risk but as research into the future of higher education.

Figure 3. Gen AI Policies in Higher Education Institutions Status

Question: Which best describes your institution's current GenAI policy framework?



Question: Looking ahead, what direction do you think your institution should take on GenAI use in teaching and assessment?



Source: Digital Education Council Global Summit 2025.

The policy landscape reveals a wide spectrum of readiness: 42% of institutions have already implemented institution-wide GenAI policies, 31% are in early draft or pilot stages, while the remainder either lack formal policies or operate with inconsistent ones.

Approaches also fall along a spectrum: 55% use a context-based or hybrid model, 29% use a three-lane system, and the rest still rely on allowed/not-allowed rules. Guidance remains unclear in practice: only 14% say GenAI guidance is highly consistent, while 41% describe it as fragmented.

Looking ahead, 61% of respondents favour balanced integration with structured guidance and training, while 35% support open innovation which shows broad consensus for moving forward constructively rather than restrictively, with only 2% wanting stricter controls.

Four Approaches Driving Effective Change Implementation

1. Sequence before scale. Start small with faculty-led pilots, evaluate what works, and only then expand. Progression, not explosion builds credibility and trust.

2. Align leadership with grassroots innovation. Top-down vision must meet bottom-up creativity; distributed ownership among students, early-career academics, and professional staff ensures real adoption and lasting change.

3. Reverse-engineer programmes based on employer demand. Institutions are moving toward validating new content and programmes through employer-facing pilots such as executive education, short courses, and micro-credentials, and scaling these into credit-bearing programmes when market evidence demonstrates clear value.

4. Co-design curriculum with industry. Curriculum should be built with industry embedded end-to-end, with employers shaping curriculum cycles, assessments, and continuous feedback. Consultation is obsolete; co-ownership is the model that keeps pace with an AI-accelerated labor market.

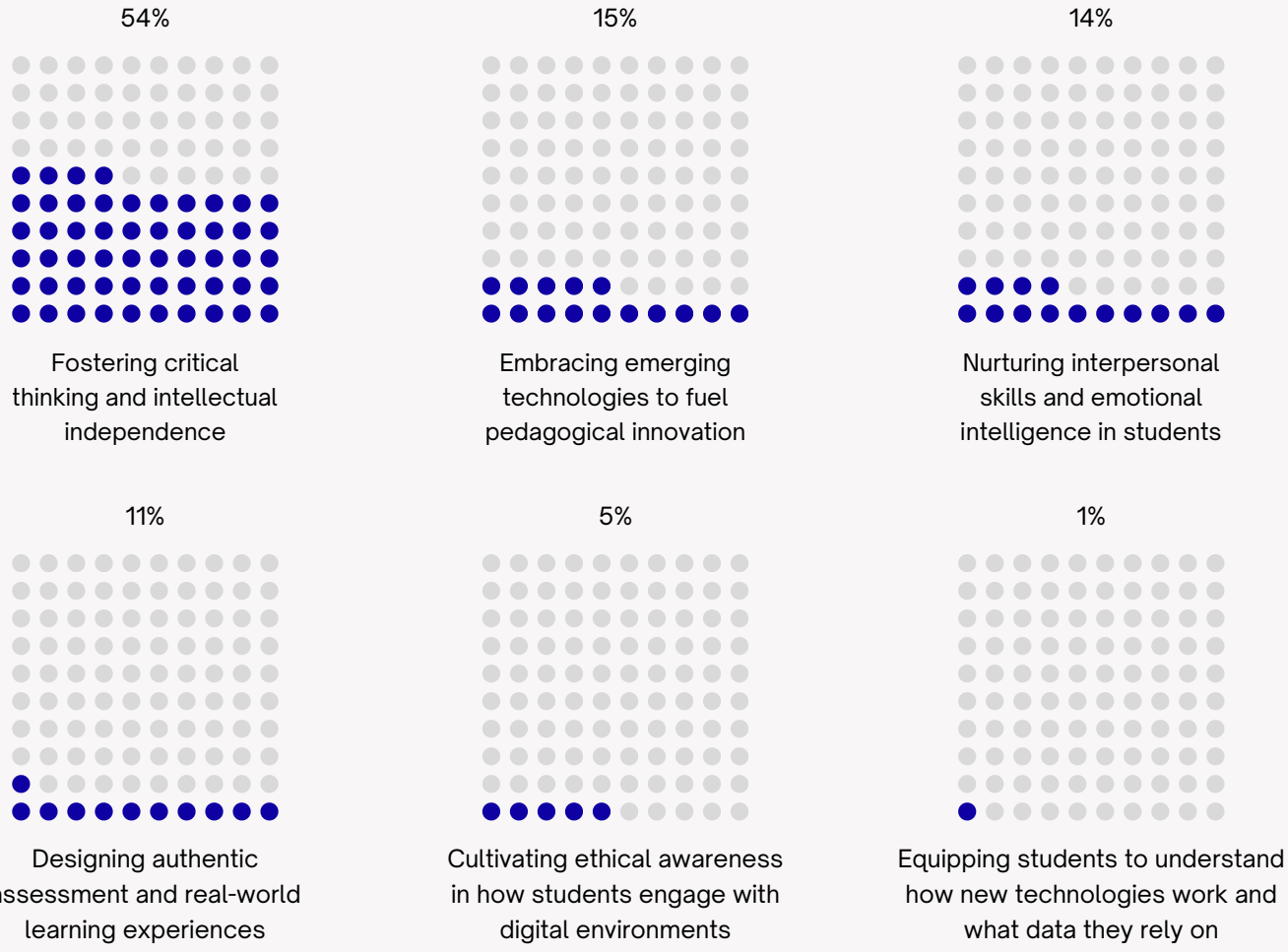
Teaching Change

AI is reshaping not only what students learn but how faculty teach and define their professional identity. Across the sessions, a clear pattern emerged: students are using AI to compensate for design gaps in personalisation, feedback, and iterative practice that traditional learning environments often fail to provide. This signals a need for structural shift: educators must intentionally redesign learning experiences where AI acts as a cognitive partner that deepens thinking rather than replaces it.

At the same time, faculty themselves need new capabilities. Leaders believe that the educator of tomorrow will be defined above all by the ability to cultivate critical thinking and intellectual independence (54%). Alongside this, educators must foster interpersonal skills, technology understanding, and real-world learning, thereby balancing human development with thoughtful, future-oriented teaching design. In an AI-enabled institution, educators focus less on tools and more on creating environments where judgment, sense-making, and ethical reasoning take precedence.

Figure 4. Essential Skills for Future Educators

Question: What is the most important skill that will define the educator of tomorrow? (Choose only one)



Source: Digital Education Council Global Summit 2025.

A set of practical recommendations emerged as an outcome of discussions:

- **Design** learning for active AI participation. Use authentic simulations, AI personas, and structured reflection to position AI as a thinking partner rather than a shortcut, helping students develop judgement, not dependency.
- **Make** AI literacy universal, setting a baseline for all students and staff, then add discipline-specific guidance integrating technical understanding with ethical reasoning and responsible use.
- **Support** faculty in shifting from content deliverers to as architects of learning who curate, communicate, create, and contemplate new teaching excellence. AI amplifies delivery but deep reflection remains distinctly human.
- **Build** faculty confidence and competence by providing a shared baseline of AI literacy for all educators, paired with deep, discipline-specific guidance so faculty can redesign learning, assessment, and classroom practices in ways that close the pedagogical gaps students are currently filling with AI.

Measuring Change

Higher education is rethinking how it defines and measures success. Metrics such as employability, rankings, and digital adoption still matter but they fall short because they track short-term performance rather than the deeper qualities such as curriculum agility, equity impact, graduate adaptability, and institutional resilience.

Graduates are entering a volatile, AI-augmented workforce where adaptability, ethical judgment, and lifelong learning matter as much as credentials.

Measuring these dimensions requires institutions to track progress across social mobility, skill relevance, and institutional responsiveness to change.

Leaders proposed shifting to a new suite of indicators that better reflect future-ready institutions. The key focus was to capture whether universities generate opportunity, maintain external relevance, and evolve fast enough to keep up with technological change.

Figure 5. Key Indicators to Track The Digital Transformation

Career Agility	Panellists emphasised that employability must shift from first-job outcomes to a graduate's ability to adapt, relearn, and pivot as roles evolve. Institutions should measure long-term mobility, not moment-in-time placement.
Social Mobility	Leaders argued that real institutional value lies in who gains access, who succeeds, and whose life trajectory improves. Social mobility should become a primary indicator of institutional impact.
Judgment and Epistemic Integrity	With AI generating content, panellists noted that the core differentiator is a student's ability to evaluate truth, apply context, and make ethical decisions. Institutions must measure these directly through assessment.
Curriculum Velocity	A clear outcome of the discussions was that maturity depends on how quickly institutions can redesign curriculum, retire obsolete content, and integrate new competencies. Agility will define future-ready institutions.

Together, these indicators signal a shift from measuring what institutions produce to measuring what they enable: mobility, adaptability, judgment, and continuous renewal.

As AI accelerates change, universities that track these deeper measures will be best positioned to remain relevant, resilient, and trusted.

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A full transcript of the speech delivered by Mr.Danny Bielik, President of the Digital Education Council, is available at: https://www.digitaleducationcouncil.com/post/dec-global-summit-insufficiently-uncomfortable---our-role-in-todays-society

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