

Using AI to build an equitable digital future

While universities may have different approaches to the adoption of AI, they share the same important role in steering ethical use of technology and building critical thinking skills in students

As the pace of AI-driven change accelerates, universities around the world are striving to keep up. In addition to modifying courses and assessments to reflect the changes prompted by AI, institutions must also consider how these models can help bridge the digital divide and widen access to education in a digital world.

A panel discussion, held in partnership with Lingnan University, at the 2026 Global Sustainable Development Congress discussed how AI can help universities transform higher education ecosystems to prepare learners for the future.

Looking at the bigger picture

“Addressing the digital divide requires sustained investment in digital infrastructure and AI systems that better reflect diverse languages and cultures, because there is a huge language limitation for the use of AI,” said Shinobu Yamaguchi, director of the Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability at the United Nations University (UNU). “That’s why it’s important to invest in low-code resources for different languages and cultures. So when we talk about effective AI utilisation to help the education system, it’s not only a question of technology.”

UNU is composed of 13 research institutes across 12 countries. Its AI network has developed a contextualised AI system to offer governments better access to data they can integrate into decision-making. Through its research, UNU also supports the Global Digital Compact, a comprehensive global framework for digital cooperation and AI governance.

Nazih Khaddaj Mallat, vice-president of Al Ain University in the United Arab Emirates, talked about government efforts supporting all universities in adopting AI in their curriculum. “Our main challenge is that traditional assessment will not be suitable for using AI,” he said. Getting students to understand how AI works through activities such as critiquing AI output can be a more constructive approach than banning it or having blanket policies on how it can be used. “One of the things we can do is use AI as a second assignment. Let students use AI, but the second assignment should be to critique this AI output,” he added.

Adapting the curriculum

A leading liberal arts institution in Hong Kong, Lingnan University made a bold initiative in 2023 by offering access to premium AI tools to all students and staff. This meant that those who could not otherwise afford them were not at a disadvantage, said the university’s president, S. Joe Qin.

“This motivated everyone to take advantage of AI and integrate it, make it part of their work and study,” Qin said. All students at the university must complete a compulsory module in generative AI that covers how large language models work, how to evaluate the quality of AI output and the need to critically reflect on ethical concerns, limitations and potential misuses of these tools.

Introducing AI across the university has enabled departments to interpret how to use it in their own way, Qin added. Having clear policies and guidelines at the centre of AI adoption is a must. At the same time, it is important to emphasise the role of human oversight.

Building essential skills

Siemens has a dual role to play in promoting the benefits of AI in higher education. As an industrial technology provider, it supports universities in adopting smart infrastructure and digital technologies to offer better and more responsive learning environments while helping them equip students with digital skills they will need in the future workplace.

Meetu Chawla, vertical head for higher education at Siemens India, discussed the company's 2026 Global SIMARIS Challenge, which brought together more than 700 students from 220 universities and 44 countries. The students were tasked with using Siemens tools to undertake an electrical planning project for a data centre.

Working on such initiatives enables students to acquire real-life skills, said Chawla. "Students are no longer just studying energy systems. They are seeing how energy is optimised and [looking at] other systems that can be optimised to bring digitalisation and sustainability into the entire infrastructure," she added. On campus, they can immerse themselves in the smart systems and learn how they work. For example, Siemens has a strategic partnership with the University of East London, providing sustainable energy technology infrastructure while also supporting the university in embedding sustainability in its curriculum.

The power of experiential learning

Qin emphasised the need for experiential learning alongside the rapid adoption of AI. "As universities, we are responsible for providing systematic learning," he said. "Students still have to do certain things to pass exams and assessments, but the process of getting there may be changed by AI."

Students now have more choice in how they access learning – through in-person lectures, digital access or learning outside the classroom. "We need experiential learning where students learn from each other interactively," Qin said. With this in mind, universities have to reframe assignments and assessments so they encourage critical thinking.

How to develop consistent policies on AI use and governance while retaining a level of flexibility and personalisation was a recurrent topic during the discussion. Small student cohorts at Lingnan University mean educators have more face-to-face time with students. The time saved by using AI to prepare for seminars and lectures enables educators to devote energy to mentorship and building core skills in students.

The panel agreed that the relationship between universities and AI is still evolving, with future developments in the technology likely to require an agile and adaptable response. Supporting students in using AI to solve real-world problems while building critical human skills must remain a priority.

The panel:

- Meetu Chawla, vertical head for higher education, Siemens India
- Nazih Khaddaj Mallat, vice-president, AI Ain University
- Alistair Lawrence, head of branded content, Times Higher Education (chair)
- S. Joe Qin, president, Lingnan University
- Shinobu Yamaguchi, director, Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability, United Nations University

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