



EAB

Signals to Stories: Higher Education 2028

A Lot Can Change in Three Years...



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2019

Global health stable;
COVID unknown

TikTok fringe;
no public AI

Low interest rates;
relative affordability

Work from home
rare perk

Relative geopolitical
stability

Lecture theatres full

China supplies 40% of
international students

Universities broadly
trusted

2022

Vaccines + restrictions;
"living with COVID"

TikTok dominates;
ChatGPT launches

Inflation spikes;
affordability crisis

Hybrid work
entrenched

Russian invasion of
Ukraine reshapes security

Hybrid mainstream via
Zoom + LMS

Borders reopen;
India surges

Value-for-money
debate sharpens

2025

Scars remain in supply
chains, workforce

AI copilots embedded
in life/work/study

Housing scarcity a
political flashpoint

AI copilots + 4-day
weeks common

Indo-Pacific tensions
dominate strategy

Assessment redesigned
for AI

Caps + diversification
into SE Asia

Scrutiny of graduate
outcomes

2028



Table Exercise

- 1. Read** your table's "signals" document (2 minutes)
- 2. Introduce yourself:** Name, institution, which signal feels most consequential to your university, and why (10 minutes)
- 3. Create a headline:** As a table, write a *Times Higher Education* headline you might plausibly see in 2028 about your trend (12 minutes)
- 4. Build the story:** What's the story of an institution that's profiled in this article from the future – what actions are they taking, what are they investing in? (8 minutes)
- 5. Choose a reporter** to share your headline and a one-liner of your story.



Exercise Report-Back

- 1. Around-the-Table Introductions:** Name, Institution, Role
- 2. Report out** your headline and a one-liner of your story.



Data Signals

- **Usage is now default:** 86% of students globally now regularly use AI in their studies; 54% using it weekly.
- **Educator adoption:** 60% of teachers report integrating AI into their daily teaching practice; 43% of institutions say senior leaders show significant commitment to adopting AI initiatives.
- **Cheating clampdown:** Australia's regulator reports 475 academic-cheating websites have been blocked since August 2022.
- **Detector weakness:** Under simple prompt 'attacks', popular AI-text detectors' accuracy can fall to ~17%.
- **Big business:** Global AI-in-education market was valued at ~\$2.5 billion in 2022 and is projected to reach \$6 billion by 2025, reflecting surging investment.
- **For the students:** 75% of HEIs cite student outcomes as the primary driver of AI tools, followed by cost reduction.

Institutional Signals

- **University of Sydney** – Implemented a “two-lane” assessment policy that bans AI use in supervised exams but allows it in open assessments with proper disclosure; students can use tools like ChatGPT for essays if they acknowledge it, integrating AI literacy and integrity into learning.
- **Queensland University of Technology** – AI-enabled student-experience and service transformation with Salesforce Data Cloud; goal to reduce cost-to-serve and improve first-contact resolution.

2028 Times Higher Education Headline

What's the story of a uni profiled in the article?

Financial Pressures and Operating Models



Data Signals

- **Deficits on the rise:** HEIs in deficit up around the world; 75% of UK HEIs expect to be in deficit for 25-26.
- **Eroding financial buffers:** One-third of UK unis had cash reserves covering <100 days of operations last year, with a growing number at “material risk” of closure without drastic cuts or mergers.
- **Export engine:** International education contributed A\$51.0bn in export income in 2023–24; higher education made up ~A\$36.4bn.
- **Higher entry costs:** Minimum savings for student visas lifted to A\$29,710 (financial capacity).
- **Growth tied to housing:** From 2026, Australia’s national planning level for international students is set at 295,000, with growth linked to accommodation and partnerships.
- **Cost cutting era:** Institutions are responding with hiring freezes, workforce cuts, restructuring, and course closures.

Institutional Signals

- **University of Southern Queensland –** Began a university-wide restructure in 2024 to streamline academic and professional services and strengthen financial resilience.
- **Massey University –** After significant restructuring, reported a provisional surplus of NZ\$29.4m in 2024, moving back towards sustainability.
- **Charles Darwin University –** Building a 350-bed on-campus student accommodation facility to align enrolment growth with housing capacity (opening 2026).

2028 Times Higher Education Headline

What’s the story of a uni profiled in the article?

Student Demographics and Recruitment



Data Signals

- **Cap with incentives:** Australia will move to a 295,000 national planning level for international students in 2026, rewarding providers that add housing and deepen regional ties.
- **Tougher entry rules:** English-language thresholds and proof-of-funds were tightened in 2024, raising entry barriers for some cohorts.
- **Competitor cap:** Canada instituted a national cap for 2024–25 (zero net growth model) and further reduced 2025 approvals to 437,000; UK banned most dependants on taught-master's visas, reducing attractiveness.
- **NZ growth surge:** New Zealand approved 39,300 student visas in the year to March 2024 (+36% YoY); India (+36%) and China (+29%) led growth.
- **Market concentration:** China remained Australia's largest education-export market in 2023–24 (A\$12.16bn), followed by India (A\$9.93bn).

Institutional Signals

- **RMIT Vietnam** – AU\$250m multi-year investment to expand Ho Chi Minh City operations and establish innovation hubs, deepening TNE diversification.
- **New Zealand's 'Going for Growth 2034' strategy** – System-level push to lift sector value to NZ\$7.2bn by 2034 and diversify markets.
- **University of Queensland & Indonesia** – Long-standing partnerships stepping up through 2024–25 initiatives and funding supports.

2028 Times Higher Education Headline

What's the story of a uni profiled in the article?

Student Readiness and Wellbeing



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Data Signals

- **Mental health worsening:** In many countries up to 50% of students report having mental health challenges; roughly 20% meet criteria for depression and 15% have seriously contemplated suicide.
- **Support demand > supply:** Insufficient resources prompting proactive, preventive wellbeing initiatives (wellness courses, peer support, mental health days).
- **Attrition risk:** In 2023, 13.9% of international undergrads and 12.2% of international postgrad students in AUS considered leaving; financial difficulties and stress levels are the leading reasons.
- **Academic readiness falling:** Staff perceive students as less prepared and lacking critical thinking, problem-solving and analysis skills; others struggling with basics like writing and math, with remedial and tutoring needs up.
- **Work experience gap:** Employment while studying rated lower (~80% UG; ~76% PG), with work experience in field lowest (~75% UG; ~66% PG).

Institutional Signals

- **University of Canterbury (NZ)** – ‘Analytics for Course Engagement (ACE)’ early-alert system scaled across UG, prompting proactive outreach to disengaged students.
- **University of Sydney** – ‘Track & Connect’ early-intervention model to contact at-risk first-years, improving engagement and referrals to support.
- **University of Kent (UK)** – Student-led wellbeing advisory board redesigned support services and conduct outreach, leading to 22% engagement of students in programming.

2028 Times Higher Education Headline

What’s the story of a uni profiled in the article?

Digital Transformation of Learning



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Data Signals

- **System-wide adoption:** All ANZ unis participate in digital credential platform My eEquals, now serving 90+ providers; >10 million documents/badges issued and >2.5 million learner accounts.
- **Online learning mainstreamed:** Almost half of global learners have taken an online module; many programmes hybrid by default, mixing digital content with face-to-face interaction.
- **Changing student preferences:** Younger learners tend to prefer digital learning modalities, and 70% consider online learning more effective than traditional classroom instruction, citing flexibility and ability to replay content.
- **EdTech expansion:** Global e-learning market has grown 900% since 2000 and is expected to exceed \$370B by 2026, driven by learning management systems, online curriculum development, and analytics to personalise education at scale.

Institutional Signals

- **Griffith University** – Deep My eEquals integration has led to 250K+ credential awards since implementation.
- **University of Northampton (UK)** – new campus built to include only one traditional lecture theatre, redesigning curricula to engage with digital content beforehand and spend class time in small-group discussions and projects.
- **Arizona State University** – pioneered immersive VR simulations for UG modules, beating student outcomes in 'control' sections.

2028 Times Higher Education Headline

What's the story of a uni profiled in the article?

Equity, Access, and Inclusion



Data Signals

- **Persistent global inequity:** Even as access to higher education grows globally, equity gaps remain: low-SES and marginalised students still lag in participation and completion rates.
- **Ambitious targets:** AUS gov sets an 80% tertiary-attainment target (working-age population) by 2050 via the Universities Accord response; promises to expand regional study hubs.
- **Equity outcomes still lagging:** Despite expanded student loans and policy efforts, participation and success rates for equity groups in Australia have shown limited improvements over the last two decades.
- **A few steps back:** A growing trend involves dismantling EDI initiatives and cultural centres, threatening inclusion and support for marginalised students in conservative countries and regions.
- **Digital inclusion target:** “Closing the Gap” agenda includes a target for Indigenous Australians to achieve equal digital inclusion by 2026.

Institutional Signals

- **University of Auckland** – Tuākana, culturally-anchored peer-learning and mentoring for Māori and Pacific students, show evidence of improved academic outcomes.
- **Adelaide University** – A transformative merger designed to prioritise equity and excellence through scale, blended learning, course innovation, and First Nations integration.
- **University of Sydney** – Gadigal Program successes shows targeted entry schemes plus support can boost participation of under-represented groups (up 16% from '23 to '24).

2028 Times Higher Education Headline

What's the story of a uni profiled in the article?

Group Discussion

- What surprised you about what you did and didn't hear from colleagues?
- What high level trend did we not discuss that you expect to be spending some time on across the next year or two?
- What do you need to start doing now to be prepared if one of these headlines becomes true?



Other Possible Scenarios

Trend 1: AI Across the Institution

"Universities Scrap Essays as AI Becomes Default Study Partner"

Oral exams and portfolio assessments replace essays, reflecting students' ubiquitous use of AI tools.

"Students Sue Universities for Banning AI: 'You Can't Ban Calculators'"

A coalition of UGs launches legal action after HEIs restrict AI, arguing it is a basic learning tool.

Trend 2: Financial Pressures and Operating Models

"Shared Services Mega-Consortium Promises to Save Universities Billions"

First national HE services hub pools IT, HR, and student systems, as half of universities cut back offices

"Australian University Closes Its Doors After Years of Financial Turmoil"

Recruitment misses and bad bets reflects sector reshuffling under unrelenting financial strain.

Module 3: Student Demographics and Recruitment

"Southeast Asia Overtakes China as Top Source of International Students"

A surge from Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines reshapes recruitment strategies, benefitting TNE early movers.

"India Caps Student Outbound Numbers, Sending Shockwaves Through Global HE"

Diversification lessons bite hard (again), sending Australian and New Zealand universities on a scramble for students.

Other Possible Scenarios

Module 4: Student Readiness and Wellbeing

“Uni Mental Health Bot Now Handling 60% of Student Support Requests”

AI-driven triage and wellbeing platforms become the first point of contact for most students.

Trend 5: Digital Transformation

“Digital Skills Wallets Replace Transcripts as Global Hiring Standard”

More graduates applying for jobs using blockchain-verified skills passports, making traditional certificates redundant.

Module 6: Equity, Access, and Inclusion

“First Nations Attainment Gap Halves Following Serious Investment”

Digital equity initiatives and place-based hubs drive measurable progress, closing the participation and completion gap.

“University Mandates Four-Day Week After Student Burnout Crisis”

Campus adopt structural timetable reform to address record levels of disengagement and attrition.

“Your University’s Biggest Competitor? Google.”

Google, Microsoft, Tencent dominate micro-credential markets; employers (and students) opt for their low-cost badges over degrees.

“University Abolishes Tuition Fees for First Nations Students”

Regional university removes fees entirely for Indigenous students, framing it as an equity and nation-building investment.



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