Your AI License Is Not an AI Strategy

A provost can now stand in front of a board and say, "we have an AI initiative." Give it ninety seconds of follow-up questions, and you usually find out whether that's true.

Digital Education Council's 2026 global survey - 45,398 responses, students and faculty, 35 countries - found that AI use has gone fully mainstream: 88% of students and 77% of faculty now use it, both up 16 points in a single year. Ellucian's separate survey of higher-ed professionals puts personal AI use at 90%. By any measure, the access problem is solved.

Now look underneath those numbers. In the same DEC survey, only 15% of students say AI is integrated into more than a few of their courses. 43% say it isn't integrated into any course at all. Ellucian found institutional AI adoption at 66% - but only 43% say AI actually shows up in their institution's strategic plan. Everyone has access. Fewer than half have a plan.

That gap is the whole story, and it's the mistake I watch leadership teams make on repeat: treating a license agreement, a chatbot pilot, or a faculty workshop as if it were a strategy. It isn't. It's access. Access is not adoption. Adoption is a faculty member using it inside a real course, with a syllabus line, an assignment, and an assessment that reflects it. Everything short of that is interest, dressed up in a press release.

Here's the number that should worry academic leaders more than the adoption gap itself: only 29% of students believe their instructors are well equipped to guide them on AI use. In the US and Canada, that drops to 17%. Read that carefully, because it's not a faculty-resistance problem - faculty intent to keep using AI is still above 70% in most regions surveyed. What's actually missing is capacity: time to redesign an assignment, a bank of vetted examples, a low-stakes way to try something in one section before betting a whole course on it. Blaming faculty for this is a little like blaming a pilot for not flying a plane nobody fueled.

I spend my working life building university adoption pathways for hi-tech and semiconductor companies, and I see the same five gaps every time a university partnership stalls out at "we did a demo" instead of turning into a program:

1. **No named faculty champion** actually teaching with it in a course, this term.
2. **No revised syllabus or assignment** - the technology sits next to the course, not inside it.
3. **No instructor guide** a second faculty member could pick up without the vendor still in the room.

4. **No changed assessment** - testing whether students can do something different, not just faster.
5. **No student work to point to** and say, "this is what changed because of it."

None of those five requires a bigger AI budget. They require someone deciding that a course - not a conference booth, not a platform license - is the actual unit of change. That's true whether you're a provost measuring your own campus, or a CMO at a tech company trying to figure out why the "university partnership" your team announced last year produced a logo on a lab wall and nothing else. Sponsorship gets attention. A syllabus gets used every semester whether or not anyone's watching.

I don't have a controlled study proving that syllabus-level redesign moves learning outcomes - nobody does yet, at this scale, this fast. What I have is enough pattern-matching across programs to say this with confidence: the five gaps above are where every stalled initiative I've seen actually died and closing them is cheaper than most people assume.

So, skip "are we using AI?" at your next staff meeting or town hall. Everyone in the room already knows the answer is yes - 88% of your students just told a global survey the same thing. Ask instead: how many faculty are teaching with it in a real course this term, and what changed in the syllabus because they did? If you can name three, you have a program. If you can't, you have a license - and a press release.

Sources

- Digital Education Council, *AI in Higher Education Global Survey 2026* (45,398 respondents, 35 countries, published July 2026)
- Ellucian, *3rd Annual Higher Education AI Survey* (779 respondents, US/Canada, Sept–Nov 2025)