

COMMENTARY

# Beyond Adoption: What the 2026 Global AI Survey Means for Vocational Education

*A senior lecturer's perspective on curriculum, assessment and occupational readiness*

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Based on the Digital Education Council's AI in Higher Education Global Survey 2026

*"Adoption is now widespread, but coherent practice is not."*

Alessandro Di Lullo and Daniel A. Bielik, DEC Leadership Note (2026, p. 4)

*For vocational education, the central question is no longer whether learners and lecturers use AI. It is whether programmes can turn that use into demonstrable occupational competence without weakening judgement, authenticity or public trust.*

## The survey deserves our attention

The Digital Education Council's AI in Higher Education Global Survey 2026 is unusually substantial: it brings together 45,398 responses from 27,284 students and 18,114 faculty members across 35 countries and four broad regions. The report builds on DEC's earlier student, faculty and Latin American studies, making it one of the largest geographically diverse datasets currently available on AI adoption in higher education (Digital Education Council [DEC], 2026, p. 3). Although the survey is not a dedicated study of vocational education and training, its findings matter greatly to those of us who teach for employment, occupational progression and professional practice.

My reading is that the report documents a widening gap between use and educational design. Eighty-eight per cent of students use AI in learning, while 77% of faculty use it in teaching (DEC, 2026, pp. 21–22). Yet only 15% of students say AI is integrated across many courses, and among those who encounter it, just 5% describe the effect as transformational (DEC, 2026, p. 13). AI is present, certainly, but presence is not the same as pedagogy. In vocational education, that distinction is decisive because the credibility of a programme rests on what a learner can perform, explain and defend in conditions that resemble work.

The research behind this report was led by Hui Rong, Research & Intelligence Lead, and Maftuna Mavlonova, Research & Intelligence Associate, with a leadership note signed by Chief Executive Officer Alessandro Di Lullo and President Daniel A. Bielik. I name them deliberately, because attribution matters: the evidence in this article belongs to the Digital Education Council. The evidence I'm drawing on is how this research by the Digital Education Council's; effects the vocational context, along with recommendations.

## Adoption is not competence

*Vocational education should resist the temptation to count tool use as evidence of workplace readiness.*

The survey contains encouraging signs. Sixty-one per cent of students who use AI say it releases time from repetitive tasks so that they can think through ideas, and 31% say they attempt more challenging work. But the same page records early signs of dependence: 21% find it harder to work through problems without AI, 20% depend on it to produce better work and 19% believe they retain less (DEC, 2026, p. 11). The Council therefore asks how institutions can preserve the independent thinking that AI may displace. That question should sit at the heart of vocational curriculum design.

In a vocational setting, competent performance is never merely the production of an acceptable artefact. A technician must diagnose, a care worker must exercise discretion, a designer must justify choices, and a business practitioner must interpret consequences. If AI helps to produce the visible outcome while concealing the learner's reasoning, the assessment may certify a product without certifying competence. We therefore need to distinguish assisted performance from independent capability, and routine efficiency from the judgement required when the routine breaks down.

The report's literacy framework is useful here because it extends beyond basic tool use. It considers understanding AI and data, critical thinking and judgement, ethical and responsible use, human-centred practice, and domain expertise (DEC, 2026, pp. 16–19). For vocational provision, domain expertise is the hinge. A learner who can prompt fluently but cannot recognise an unsafe recommendation, a regulatory breach or an implausible output is not occupationally AI-literate.

## The curriculum relevance warning is especially serious for VET

Only 30% of students believe their programme feels current in relation to AI and future skills, while 37% express serious doubts (DEC, 2026, p. 25). More starkly, half of students feel underprepared to use AI professionally; only 23% feel adequately prepared (DEC, 2026, p. 33). These are not abstract satisfaction measures. In vocational education, currency is part of the qualification's promise. Learners enrol because they expect a credible route into an occupation, and employers engage because they expect provision to reflect changing work.

The answer is not to insert a generic AI unit into every programme and declare the curriculum modernised. Occupational use must be mapped at task level: where AI is already augmenting planning, analysis, documentation, quality assurance, customer communication or decision support; where its use is prohibited or constrained; and where human accountability remains non-delegable. That mapping should involve lecturers, employers, professional bodies, work-based mentors and learners. It should then feed directly into learning outcomes, practical activities and assessment criteria.

The students themselves are asking for precisely this kind of practical literacy. Their leading development priority is the ability to critically evaluate and fact-check AI output (51%), followed by knowing when to use AI and when not to use it (45%). Thirty-nine per cent want to learn how to use AI for tasks related to their future profession (DEC, 2026, p. 68). This is a far more mature request than 'teach us prompts'. Learners want judgement, relevance and boundaries.

## Assessment is the real stress test

*If the workplace is changing but assessment remains static, the qualification will slowly lose validity.*

The survey reports that 72% of students do not consistently see their assessments reflecting the work, skills and judgement they expect to need in an AI-enabled workplace. Only 10% say most assessments do so, and a further 18% say many do (DEC, 2026, p. 34). For vocational education, this is arguably the report's most consequential finding. Assessment is where claims about employability become evidence. If occupational practice includes responsible AI use, banning AI from every task creates an artificial assessment environment. If unrestricted AI use obscures individual competence, however, validity is equally compromised.

A more defensible approach is a deliberately mixed assessment system. Some tasks should test unaided foundational knowledge and manual or interpersonal skill. Others should permit or require AI because competent practitioners will use it. The evidence can then include live demonstration, observation, oral questioning, process logs, annotated prompts and outputs, verification against

authoritative sources, and reflection on rejected suggestions. The learner should be able to identify what the tool did, what they did, what they checked, and why the final decision remains theirs.

Clarity is not a minor administrative matter. Fifty-seven per cent of students report inadequate guidance on whether and how AI may be used in assessments (DEC, 2026, p. 65). Di Lullo and Bielik capture the issue neatly: “Students are not asking for less rigour; they are asking for clarity” (2026, p. 4). In practical programmes, that clarity should be assessment-specific. A single institutional traffic-light policy cannot anticipate the differences between a reflective journal, a wiring task, a clinical simulation, a design brief and a workplace project.

## Human judgement is not the soft alternative

Concern about shallow learning is shared by 66% of students and 73% of faculty (DEC, 2026, p. 12). At first glance, this can sound like familiar anxiety about a new technology. The survey’s skills data suggest something more precise: faculty rank facilitating critical thinking and learning first among the capabilities educators need in the AI era (69%), followed by helping students maintain their own thinking alongside AI (66%) and expertise in ethical and responsible technology use (59%) (DEC, 2026, p. 45).

These are not attractive ‘soft skills’. In vocational practice, they are mechanisms of safety, quality and accountability. A hospitality supervisor must read the room; an engineering technician must recognise anomalous data; an early-years practitioner must protect dignity and confidentiality; a media producer must judge provenance and representation. AI can support each role, but it cannot absorb the practitioner’s duty of care. We should therefore design learning so that students routinely challenge outputs, compare alternatives, explain uncertainty and escalate decisions appropriately.

The survey’s literacy findings reinforce this priority. Half of students say they recognise that AI output can be inaccurate or misleading, yet only 30% report systematic evaluation using criteria such as accuracy, bias, explainability and source reliability (DEC, 2026, p. 57). Awareness is a start; vocational competence requires a repeatable checking practice embedded in the norms of a particular occupation.

## Lecturers need occupationally specific development

*Staff confidence will not be built by another generic demonstration of a chatbot.*

Only 29% of students believe their instructors are well equipped to guide them on AI use (DEC, 2026, p. 28). Faculty are also clear about what they need: 62% want to integrate AI meaningfully into teaching and curriculum, 60% want to automate routine teaching or administrative work, and 58% want to design assessments that work in an AI-enabled environment (DEC, 2026, p. 71). This points towards development organised around teaching problems and occupational contexts, not around product features.

A useful staff-development model would bring subject lecturers together with learning technologists, librarians, assessment specialists, employers and quality colleagues. The group would examine real occupational tasks, test relevant tools, identify failure modes and data risks, redesign one assessment, and agree what evidence of individual competence will be retained. The outcome should be a teachable activity and an assessable standard, not merely increased confidence with a platform.

The current pattern is still incremental. Among faculty, 53% report making some adjustments without fundamentally changing their teaching, while only 19% report significant change (DEC, 2026, p. 63). That is understandable: redesign is demanding, particularly where accreditation requirements, awarding-body rules and placement arrangements constrain rapid change. But it also means leaders must create time, exemplars and approval routes for serious curriculum work.

## Governance must reach the workshop, studio and placement

Policy exists in many institutions, but practical application remains weak. Only 37% of faculty agree that their institution's AI guidelines are practical and easy to apply, while 39% are neutral and 25% disagree (DEC, 2026, p. 74). Only 31% feel meaningfully involved in shaping policy, and just 34% of students say their institution actively seeks their feedback on AI (DEC, 2026, pp. 75, 77). A policy written without those who teach, learn and supervise practice will struggle to govern the realities of vocational provision.

VET governance must travel across boundaries. It must cover campus learning, simulated environments, employer systems, placements, apprenticeships and commercially sensitive projects. It should address confidential and personal data, intellectual property, disclosure, bias, safety-critical advice, accessibility, record keeping and the learner's responsibility for final work. Crucially, it should translate these principles into short scenarios that a lecturer, assessor, workplace mentor and student can apply consistently.

This is also where accreditation and quality assurance need to catch up. Programme teams should be able to show how AI-related occupational changes were identified, how employers and learners contributed, which competencies were revised, how assessment validity is protected, and how staff capability is maintained. External reviewers should ask for this evidence without imposing a uniform level of AI adoption across occupations. Responsible non-use may be as professionally important as skilled use.

## A practical agenda for vocational institutions

*The survey calls for deliberate institutional action; vocational education can make that action concrete.*

**Map AI to occupational practice.** Review each programme with employers and practitioners. Identify augmented tasks, prohibited uses, human-accountability points and emerging skills, then align learning outcomes accordingly.

**Rebuild assessment as a portfolio of evidence.** Balance unaided performance with transparent AI-assisted work. Require observation, questioning and process evidence wherever the final product alone cannot demonstrate individual competence.

**Teach verification as a routine.** Use occupation-specific checklists for accuracy, sources, bias, safety, confidentiality and escalation. Make verification visible in marking criteria and workplace reviews.

**Develop staff through redesign projects.** Fund cross-functional teams to improve one authentic task at a time, test it with learners and employers, and share the resulting exemplars across programmes.

**Replace general policy with usable scenarios.** Give students and staff clear, assessment-level guidance. Include examples drawn from workshops, studios, laboratories, clinics, placements and apprenticeships.

## The opportunity is to make competence more visible

The survey does not justify either complacent adoption or blanket prohibition. It shows learners and lecturers already using AI, often without the curricular alignment, assessment clarity or institutional support needed to convert use into genuine learning. For vocational education, the response should be characteristically practical: analyse the work, teach the judgement, observe the performance and require the learner to account for decisions.

Done well, AI can remove low-value repetition, widen access to feedback and create richer simulations of professional problems. Done carelessly, it can produce polished evidence that tells us very little about the person being certified. Our task is not to keep AI outside vocational education. It is to ensure that, when AI enters, the learner's competence becomes more visible rather than less. That is the standard by which curriculum reform, assessment redesign and institutional policy should now be judged.

## References and attribution

Digital Education Council. (2026). *AI in higher education global survey 2026*. Digital Education Council.

Di Lullo, A., & Bielik, D. A. (2026). DEC leadership note. In Digital Education Council, *AI in higher education global survey 2026* (p. 4). Digital Education Council.

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