From Strategy to Implementation:
Recruiting the Right Leaders for AI-Driven Teaching & Learning Innovation in Higher Education

Executive Summary

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly reshaping the landscape of higher education, particularly in the areas of teaching, learning, and assessment. From adaptive learning platforms to automated feedback systems and predictive analytics, AI holds immense promise for personalising student experiences, increasing efficiency, and improving outcomes. However, the implementation of AI tools is complex, raising questions about academic integrity, digital equity, staff readiness, and institutional reputation.

This paper explores how these changes are driving new leadership demands in UK universities. It outlines the evolving leadership roles, competencies, and recruitment strategies needed to successfully lead AI-enhanced education strategies and offers practical recommendations for head-hunters and HE leaders tasked with identifying the next generation of digitally fluent academic leaders.

1. The Impact of AI on Teaching and Learning

AI is no longer a future-facing technology, it is already being embedded in:

- **Personalised learning systems (e.g. adaptive content delivery)**
- **AI-assisted marking and feedback**
- **Predictive analytics for student support and retention**
- **Generative tools used by students for learning and assessments**
- **Virtual tutors and AI-powered course design**

These innovations are driving a paradigm shift in pedagogy, requiring senior leaders to rethink curriculum design, quality assurance, digital infrastructure, and the student experience.

2. Strategic Challenges for University Leadership

While AI offers significant opportunities, its adoption also presents strategic risks and tensions:

- **Academic Integrity:** How to respond to the use of AI tools by students in assessments?
- **Pedagogical Shifts:** What is the role of the Lecturer when content and feedback can be generated by AI?
- **Equity and Inclusion:** Are all students and staff equally equipped to benefit from AI tools?
- **Staff Development:** Are educators confident and skilled in integrating AI into their teaching?
- **Policy and Governance:** How should universities govern the ethical use of AI in education?

Addressing these issues requires bold, informed, and collaborative leadership.

3. Global Innovations in AI-Driven Learning

United States

- **Georgia Tech** has been a pioneer in AI-enhanced education for nearly a decade. Notably, it developed the AI teaching assistant "Jill Watson" (built using IBM's Watson) to support online learners in its computer science master's programme. Georgia Tech continues to explore how generative AI can personalise learning at scale and improve student engagement in hybrid and online environments.
- **Arizona State University** has partnered with OpenAI to embed generative AI into student learning and faculty development. Through its "AI Acceleration" initiative, it is rethinking course delivery, assessment models, and academic support tools across disciplines.
- **University of Michigan** launched its own large language model to prioritise data privacy in AI deployment. The institution is piloting AI in writing centres, academic advising, and digital learning innovation.
- **Stanford's Institute for Human-Centered AI** is at the forefront of AI research, ethics, and policy, with strong integration between academic programmes and AI research initiatives that inform teaching strategies and curricular reform.

Australia

- **University of Sydney** introduced AI literacy modules across UG programmes and reworked its assessment design to reduce susceptibility to AI misuse. It also launched a Responsible AI in Education Taskforce to develop policy frameworks, staff training resources, and institutional guidance on ethical use of AI.
- **University of Melbourne** offers micro-credentials and short courses focused on AI for educators, has introduced a series of "AI Futures" seminars for academic leaders to explore implications for teaching, research, and workforce needs and embedded AI ethics and digital capabilities into its new education strategy.
- **Australian National University** is investing in cross-disciplinary AI education through its School of Cybernetics and Centre for Public Awareness of Science and has developed a framework for AI-integrated teaching, focusing on student agency, critical thinking, and long-term implications of machine-assisted learning.
- **Deakin University** and **RMIT University** have launched partnerships with edtech firms and AI developers to embed AI-powered learning analytics and adaptive learning platforms into their online and hybrid courses. These institutions are also trialling AI tutors and feedback tools for formative assessment.

Elsewhere

- **ETH Zurich** is integrating AI and machine learning into all STEM degree programs and investing in cross-disciplinary teaching fellowships.
- **National University of Singapore** created a university-wide "AI for Everyone" initiative, blending AI with entrepreneurship and digital humanities.

These examples demonstrate that leading institutions are proactively embedding AI across teaching and learning, not just as a tech upgrade, but as a transformation of pedagogy, policy, and organisational culture.

4. Evolving Leadership Roles in Teaching and Learning

The strategic integration of AI into education is accelerating changes in senior academic and professional services roles:

Emerging/Transformed Roles	Key Responsibilities in AI Context
Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education)	Set institutional vision for AI-enhanced learning; lead pedagogic change
Chief Digital/Information Officer	Align AI education tools with infrastructure and data strategy
Director of Digital Learning/EdTech	Drive digital pedagogy; lead academic staff development on AI use
Director of Academic Integrity and AI	Oversee policy and training on ethical AI use in assessments
Dean or Head of School	Lead faculty-wide change in learning design and assessment practices

These roles increasingly demand experience in digital transformation, change management, data fluency, and cross-functional leadership.

5. What to Look for in Future Academic Leaders

Successful candidates for AI-era education leadership roles will combine academic credibility with digital fluency and a forward-looking mindset. Key competencies include:

Digital Fluency and Curiosity

- Leaders must demonstrate an active interest in how technologies, particularly AI, affect learning design, assessment, and student engagement.
- This includes awareness of both the opportunities (e.g., adaptive learning, personalised feedback) and risks (e.g., bias, academic misconduct).

Strategic Thinking and Systems Leadership

- They must operate beyond their own faculty or discipline, translating institutional strategy into meaningful digital and pedagogical transformation.
- Ability to align AI-related initiatives with broader goals like widening participation, internationalisation, and financial sustainability is key.

Pedagogical Innovation

- Proven track record in educational leadership, ideally including curriculum reform, technology-enabled learning, or interdisciplinary programme design.
- Must be able to influence and win the confidence of academic colleagues across diverse subject areas.

Change Leadership and Agility

- Capable of managing ambiguity, leading through rapid technological shifts, and creating psychologically safe environments for experimentation.
- Experience delivering cross-institutional projects or piloting innovations is a strong differentiator.

Inclusive and Ethical AI Stewardship

- Champions responsible AI use—particularly in relation to equity, access, data privacy, and academic integrity.
- Actively engages with sector-wide frameworks (e.g. Jisc guidance, QAA updates) and builds institutional policies that reflect evolving ethical standards.

6. Implications for Executive Search

The emergence of AI in higher education brings both new demands and opportunities for executive recruitment. As a head-hunter, there are several key implications to consider in how we position, assess, and advise on senior academic and digital education leadership roles.

At Veredus, we work closely with universities to shape leadership briefs, broaden candidate horizons, and assess potential through a future-focused lens. Based on our extensive work across the HE sector, we identify five critical implications for institutions seeking to appoint leaders who can guide AI-driven innovation.

Redefining Role Specifications

- Traditional leadership profiles must be revisited and job descriptions for roles like PVC (Education), Dean, or Director of Digital Learning should explicitly incorporate AI awareness, digital strategy leadership, and innovation capability.
- We increasingly support institutions in designing hybrid or new roles, such as Chief Academic Innovation Officer or Associate PVC (AI and Education), reflecting the need for interdisciplinary, tech-informed leadership.

Broadening the Talent Pool

- As AI blurs the boundaries between academic leadership and digital transformation, we help clients look beyond conventional academic pathways.
- Veredus identifies and engages candidates with cross-sector experience, from EdTech, digital consultancy, and innovation leadership in other industries, to global HE institutions at the forefront of AI implementation.

Assessing for Digital and Change Competence

- CVs and publication lists alone are no longer sufficient indicators of leadership potential. We integrate leadership assessments, scenario-based tasks, and stakeholder engagement sessions to explore candidates' ability to lead in a digitally disruptive environment.
- We also evaluate each candidate's appetite for innovation, their comfort with ambiguity, and their ability to influence across traditional boundaries.

Shifting Candidate Motivations

- Senior candidates increasingly seek alignment with institutions that have clear values and a responsible approach to innovation. AI strategies that prioritise inclusion, ethics, and educational quality are powerful differentiators.
- We help clients articulate their digital and educational mission in ways that resonate with purpose-driven leaders.

Supporting Transition and Onboarding

- Even the most capable leaders benefit from structured support when entering AI-disrupted environments.
- We advise on onboarding plans, peer mentoring, and access to CPD, including exposure to global case studies and emerging AI practices, to ensure new appointees are set up for success.

7. Conclusion

AI is reshaping the very core of teaching and learning in Higher Education. Navigating this transformation will require agile, visionary, and digitally confident leaders. For head-hunters and university HR teams, this is both a challenge and an opportunity to future-proof institutions by identifying and securing the right leadership talent.

By rethinking recruitment strategies and leadership profiles, the UK HE sector can build the talent needed to turn AI potential into meaningful educational progress.

About the Author

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