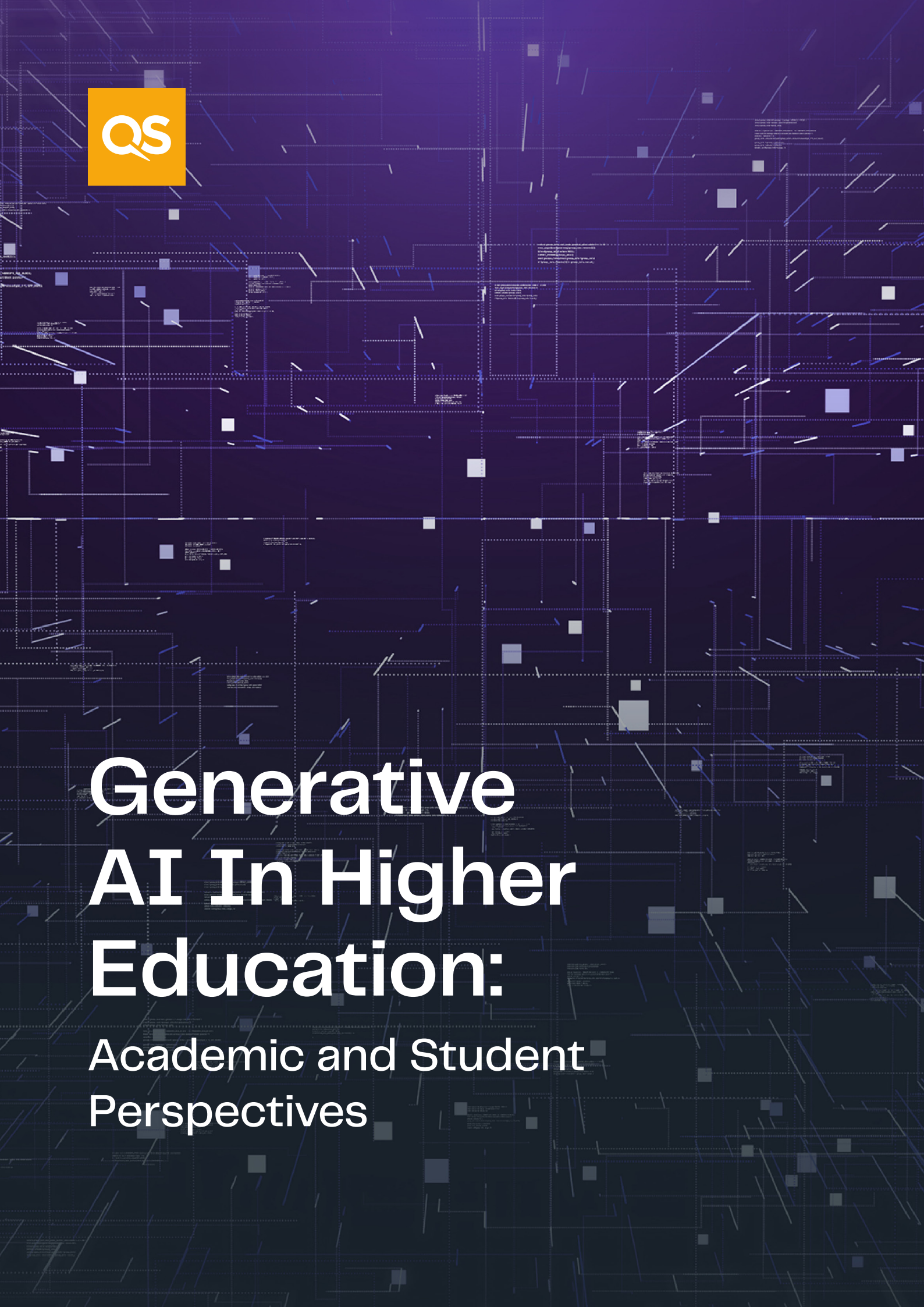

Generative AI In Higher Education:

Academic and Student Perspectives

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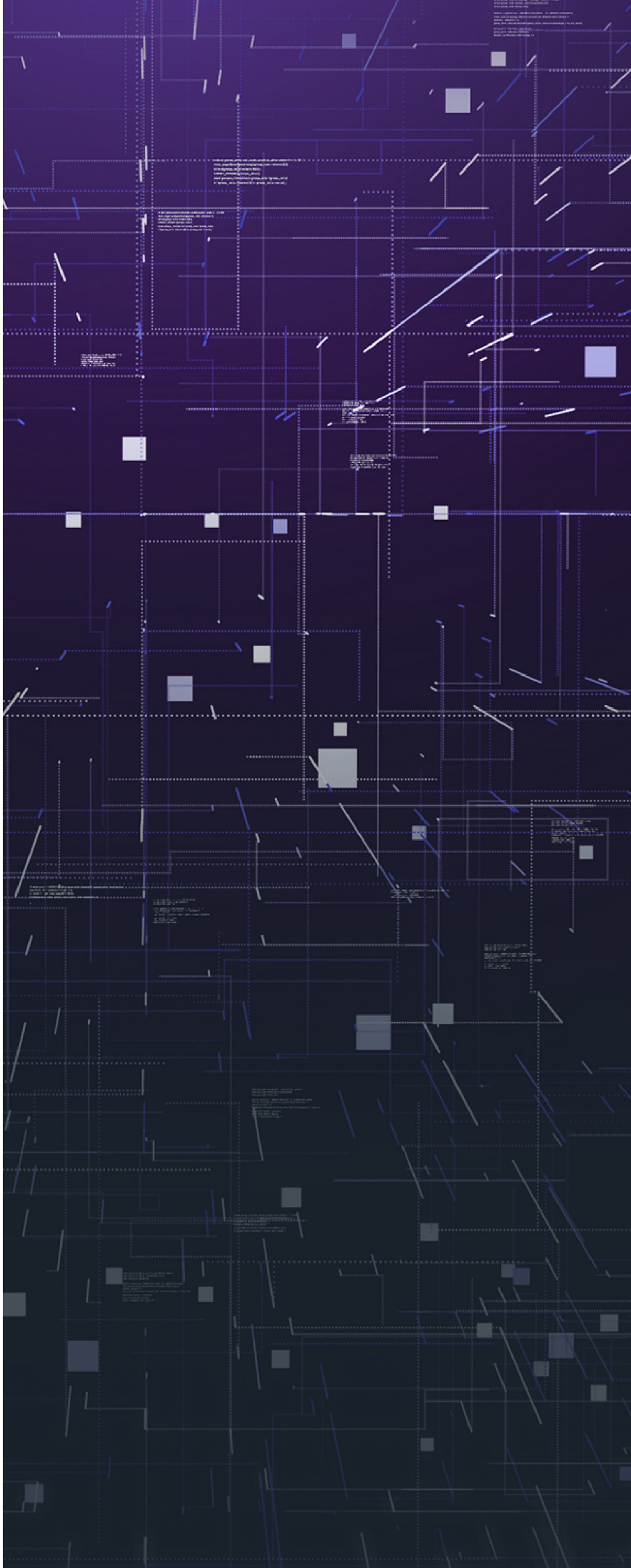


Foreword

Generative AI is rapidly reshaping higher education. In just a few years, AI tools have moved from novelty to everyday reality – influencing how students learn, how academics teach and conduct research, and how institutions think about assessment, skills and academic integrity. The pace of this change is extraordinary, and universities are now being challenged to respond in real time.

This moment presents both significant opportunity and profound responsibility. Higher education has always played a critical role in helping society navigate technological transformation. But unlike previous waves of innovation, Generative AI is evolving at a speed that leaves little room for passive observation or incremental adaptation. Institutions are being asked not only to understand the technology itself, but to make decisions about ethics, governance, pedagogy and workforce readiness while the landscape continues to shift beneath them.

The findings in this report show that adoption of Generative AI is already widespread among both students and academics. AI is embedded in universities across the world in their research, teaching preparation, assessment support and student study practices. At the same time, there is a clear and consistent message emerging from respondents around the world: universities must provide stronger ethical frameworks, clearer guidance and more practical support for responsible AI use.

Encouragingly, students and academics are broadly aligned on many of the sector's priorities. Both groups recognise the importance of AI literacy, ethical capability and transparent governance. Students, in particular, are not calling for universities to resist AI, but to help them use it responsibly, professionally and effectively as part of their future careers and learning journeys.

The regional differences highlighted in this report are equally important. Perceptions of AI, levels of trust, and confidence in its role vary significantly across global regions, reinforcing the need for universities to balance shared principles with local context and institutional realities.

What is clear is that Generative AI is no longer a future consideration for higher education – it is already changing the sector. Universities that act early to establish ethical guardrails, rethink assessment, build institutional capability and embed AI literacy into teaching and learning will be better positioned to navigate this transition successfully.

At QS, we believe higher education has a critical role to play in shaping how AI is adopted responsibly and equitably around the world. Through initiatives such as the Responsible AI Consortium and the QS AI Capability Framework, we are committed to supporting institutions as they build the capability, governance and confidence needed to lead through this period of transformation.

Dr Maria Spies
Chief Innovation Officer
QS Quacquarelli Symonds

Key findings

1. Generative AI is now mainstream in higher education. Two-thirds of academics (67%) and 62% of students use Generative AI at least weekly for teaching, research, study or administrative work.

2. Familiarity with AI has increased sharply since 2023. Nearly half of academics (48%) and over half of students (53%) now describe themselves as extremely or very familiar with Generative AI, reflecting rapid adoption across the sector.

3. Perceptions of AI are broadly positive. Most academics (74%) and students (68%) believe AI plays a somewhat or very positive role in society, with the strongest optimism reported in the Asia Pacific region.

4. AI is increasingly embedded in teaching and research workflows. Academics are using Generative AI extensively for writing and editing support, lesson preparation, assessment design, feedback generation and literature summarisation.

5. Students overwhelmingly want universities to integrate AI into learning. 94% of students say it is at least somewhat important for universities to incorporate Generative AI into the curriculum and learning experience.

6. Assessment integrity is emerging as a major issue. Almost one-quarter of students (24%) report using AI to assist with essay writing, while 30% say universities should design assessments that are harder to complete using AI tools alone.

7. Ethics, governance and data security are the sector's top concerns. Academics identify ethical concerns, data security and the lack of institutional strategy and governance as the biggest barriers to effective AI implementation.

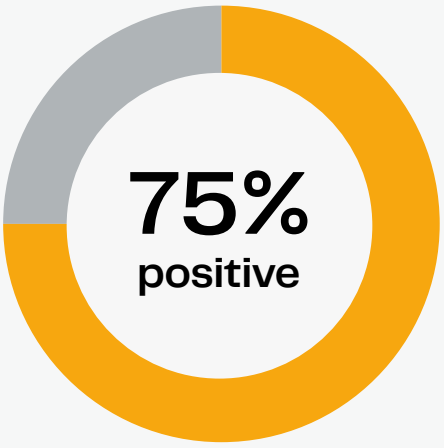
8. Students and academics strongly align on institutional priorities. Both groups want universities to provide training on how to use AI tools professionally and ethically, alongside clearer guidance on acceptable and inappropriate use.

9. Students are calling for responsible flexibility rather than restriction. While students support clearer policies and ethical guidance, many also want flexibility to use AI tools provided usage is transparent and appropriately disclosed.

10. AI literacy is becoming a core graduate capability. Students increasingly expect universities to prepare them for an AI-enabled workforce through practical AI literacy education, ethical training and career-relevant applications of AI.

Most academics recognise the positive role of AI in society and use it frequently in their own work. Students offer a similar perspective, over two thirds indicating that the role of AI in society is very or somewhat positive. Nearly 70% of academic respondents use AI for academic work at least once a week, while 62% of students say the same.

Figure 1. Academic perception of the role of AI in society



Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

The top challenges for AI implementation among academics are perceived ethical and data security concerns. However, students are clear: 66% think it's extremely or very important that universities incorporate Generative AI into the curriculum; 46% of students would like universities to offer training on how to use AI tools professionally and ethically

Students are also broadly supportive of professors using Generative AI to enhance teaching and learning. Two-thirds (67%) said they would feel somewhat or very positive about academics using AI, particularly where it improves the relevance, quality or efficiency of instruction – and provided it is used thoughtfully and transparently.

Section 1

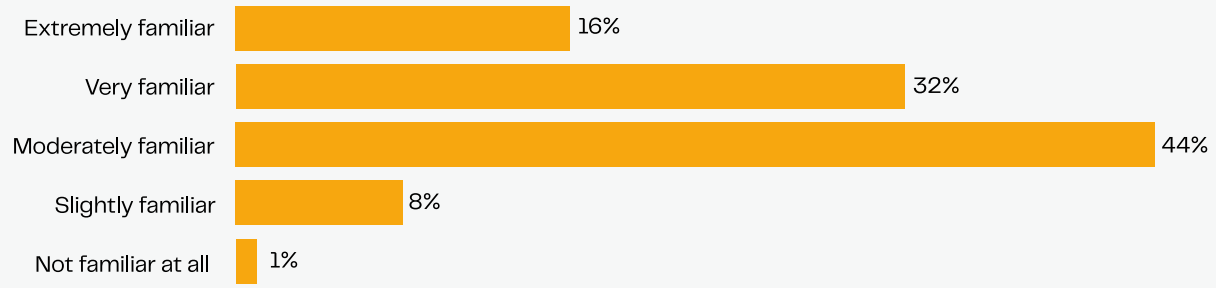
Academic perceptions of Generative AI

Familiarity and overall perception

Academics report a high level of familiarity with Generative AI. Nearly half (48%) describe themselves as either extremely or very familiar with the technology, while a further 44% say they are moderately familiar (Figure 2). This marks a significant increase from 2023, when only 30% of respondents reported being extremely or very familiar with Generative AI.

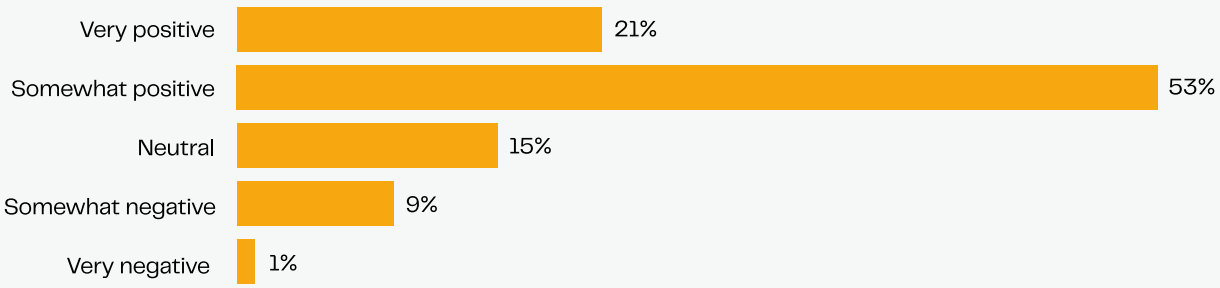
Sentiment among academics is also increasingly positive. Almost three-quarters (74%) say they view the role of AI in society as either somewhat or very positive (Figure 3), up from 68% in 2023. This shift suggests confidence is growing as AI tools become more widely understood and embedded in everyday practice – and as institutions begin establishing clearer policies, frameworks and guardrails around their use.

Figure 2. How familiar are you with Generative AI technologies and tools?



Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

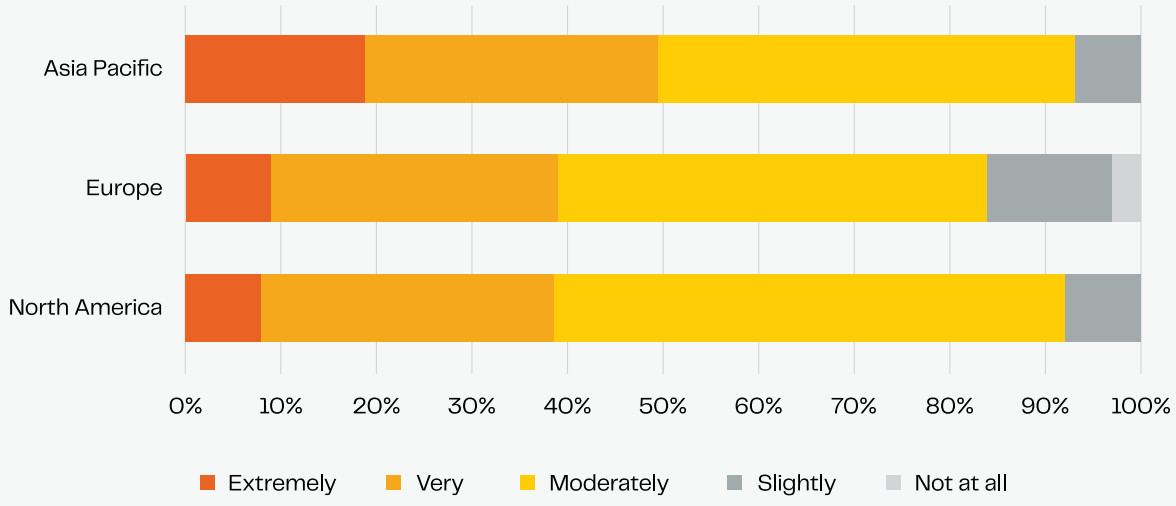
Figure 3. Overall, how do you perceive the role of AI in society?



Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

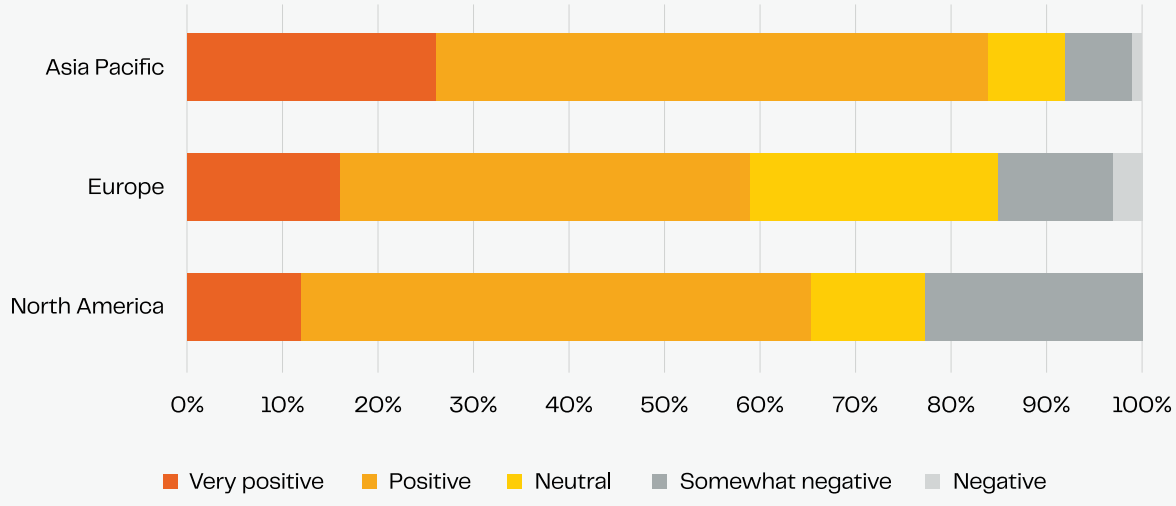
Regional differences are also emerging. Academics in the Asia Pacific region report higher levels of familiarity with Generative AI tools than their counterparts in Europe or North America, and are also the most likely to express positive views about AI's role in society (Figure 4 and 5).

Figure 4. Academic's familiarity with Generative AI tools



Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

Figure 5. Academic's perception of the role of Generative AI in society

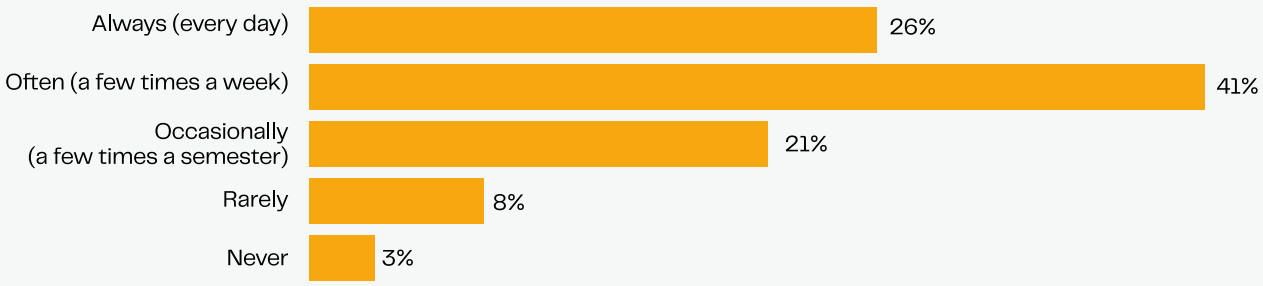


Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

Usage of Generative AI

Generative AI is already becoming embedded in day-to-day academic practice. More than a quarter (26%) of academic respondents say they use Generative AI every day in their work, while a further 41% use it a few times a week. In total, two-thirds (67%) report using Generative AI at least several times a week across activities such as teaching, research and administration. By contrast, only 3% say they never use Generative AI in any aspect of their academic work (Figure 6).

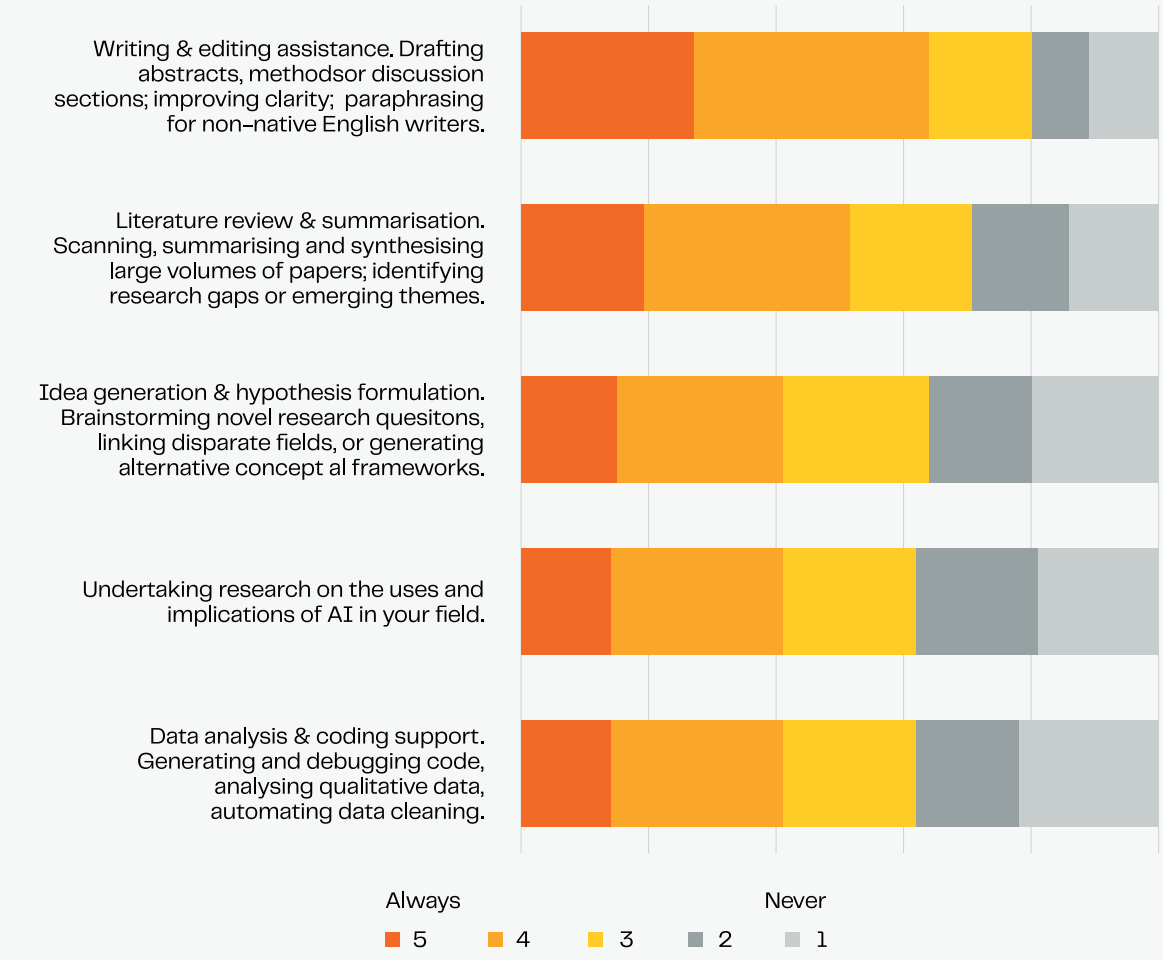
Figure 6. How often do your use Generative AI tools for your academic work (research, teaching, adminstration)?



Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

When we look more closely at how academics are using AI in research, content creation emerges as the most common application. More than a quarter of respondents say they always use Generative AI for writing and editing support, highlighting its growing role in drafting, refining and improving academic content. AI is also widely used as a productivity tool, with 19% saying they always rely on it to summarise literature and synthesise information more efficiently (Figure 7).

Figure 7. How academics use Generative AI in research



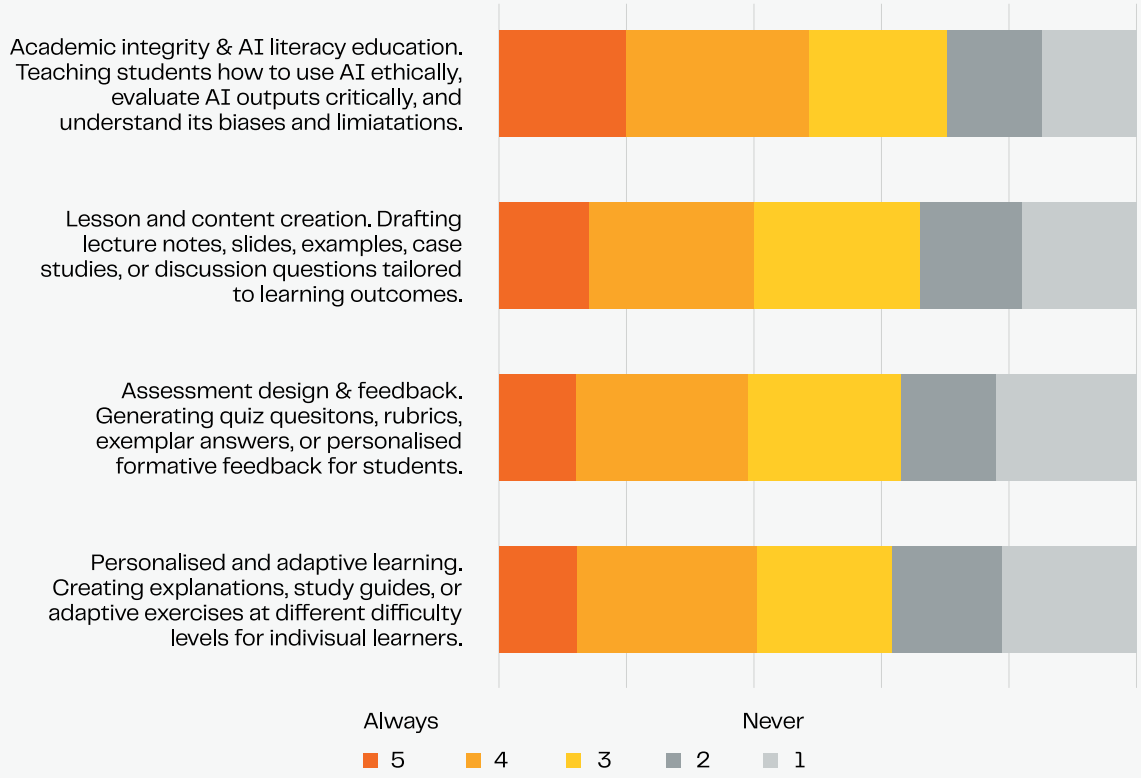
Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

The results suggest that Generative AI is already being integrated into a broad range of teaching activities, with the strongest uptake occurring in areas linked to AI literacy and academic integrity. Nearly half of academic respondents (49%) say they use Generative AI frequently or always to support teaching students how to use AI ethically, critically evaluate outputs, and understand bias and limitations. This indicates that many academics now see AI literacy not as a peripheral issue, but as an emerging core capability for students (Figure 8).

AI is also being widely adopted to support teaching preparation and instructional design. 40% of academics report using Generative AI frequently or always for lesson and content creation, including drafting lecture materials, case studies and discussion questions tailored to learning outcomes. Similarly, almost four in ten use AI regularly for assessment design and feedback, suggesting growing confidence in using AI to support more scalable and efficient approaches to formative assessment and course delivery.

Use of AI for personalised and adaptive learning is slightly less mature, though still significant. 40% of respondents report frequent or consistent use of AI to create explanations, study guides or exercises at varying levels of difficulty for individual learners. This may reflect both the emerging potential of AI-enabled personalisation and the additional pedagogical, technical and governance challenges associated with implementing adaptive learning approaches at scale. Overall, the findings point to a sector moving beyond experimentation, with Generative AI increasingly embedded across both teaching practice and student capability development.

Figure 8. How academics use Generative AI in teaching



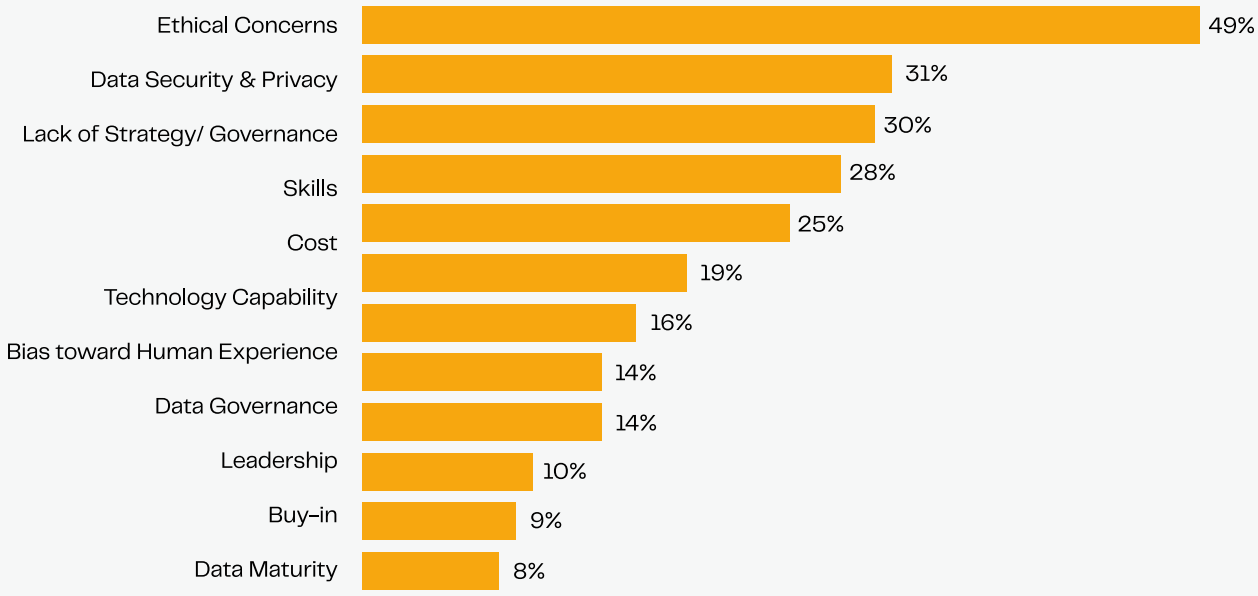
Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

Institutional priorities

Academics identify ethical concerns as the single greatest challenge associated with AI implementation at their institution. Combined with strong concerns around data security, and the absence of clear institutional strategy and governance, the findings highlight a growing need for well-defined frameworks, policies and guardrails to support the responsible use of Generative AI in higher education.

The results also point to significant operational and capability challenges. More than a quarter of respondents (28%) cite limited skills and expertise as a major barrier to implementation, while a further 19% point to insufficient technological capability or infrastructure. Cost pressures also remain significant, with one in four academics (25%) identifying funding and resourcing constraints as a key obstacle to wider adoption (Figure 9).

Figure 9. What are the top challenges for AI implementation at your institution?



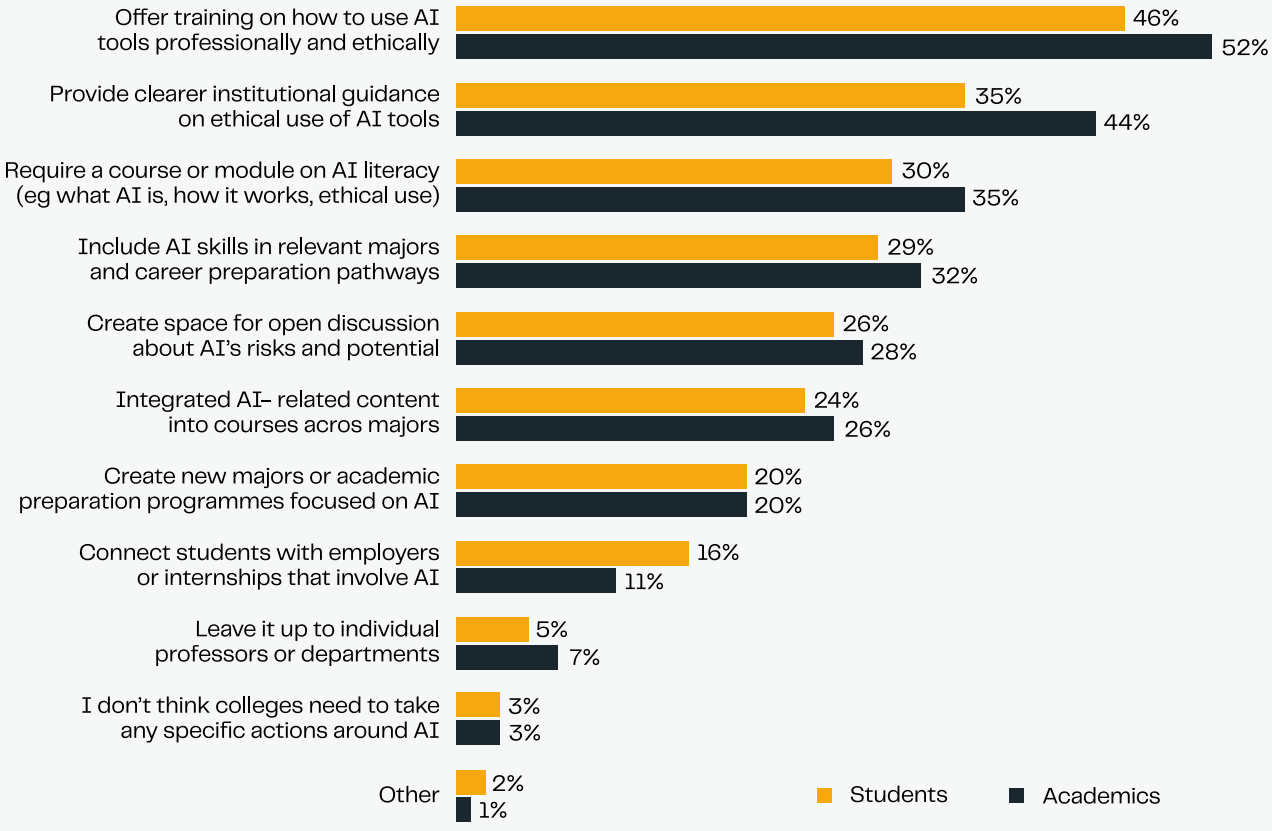
Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

Academics and students show a striking level of alignment in how universities should prepare graduates for a future shaped by Generative AI. Across both groups, the strongest priorities are practical training in how to use AI tools professionally and ethically, alongside clearer institutional guidance on appropriate and inappropriate use. More than half of academics (52%) and almost half of students (46%) identify ethical and professional AI training as the top priority, while guidance on ethical use versus misuse is also strongly emphasised by both cohorts (44% of academics and 35% of students).

There is also broad agreement that AI capability should become embedded within mainstream education, rather than treated as a standalone specialisation. Both academics and students support integrating AI skills into relevant majors and career preparation pathways, requiring foundational AI literacy education, and embedding AI-related content across disciplines.

The main difference between the two groups is a slightly stronger student focus on employability and workforce readiness. Students are somewhat more likely than academics to emphasise internships and employer connections involving AI technologies, suggesting they are particularly focused on how AI capability translates into career opportunities and future job security (Figure 10).

Figure 10. How can universities better prepare graduates for the advance of Generative AI



Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

Section 2

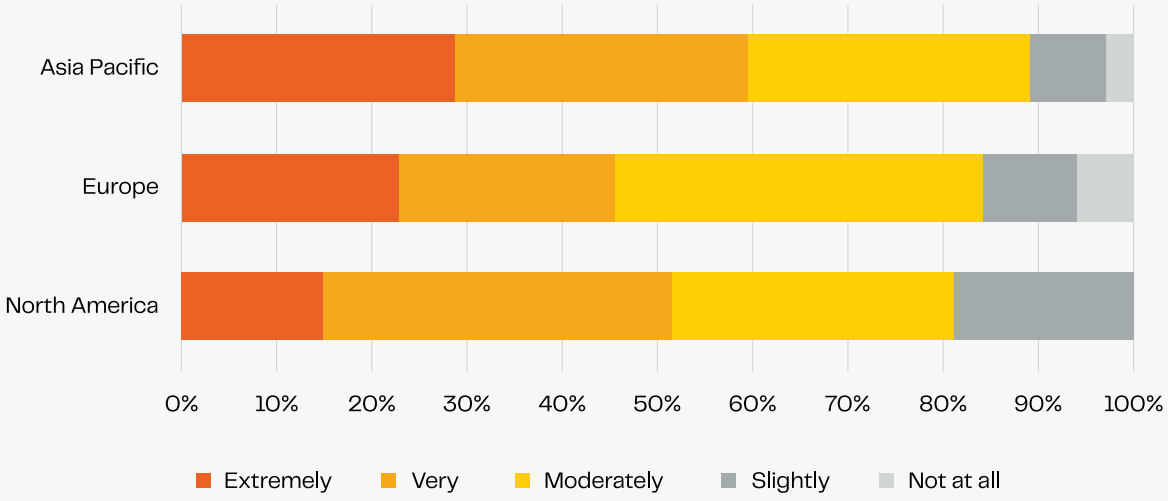
Student perceptions of Generative AI

Familiarity and overall perception

Students report even higher levels of familiarity with Generative AI than academics, underscoring how rapidly these tools have become embedded in student learning and everyday digital behaviour. More than half of students (53%) describe themselves as either extremely or very familiar with Generative AI – a notable increase from 40% in 2023.

Students also continue to view AI positively overall. More than two-thirds (68%) say they believe AI plays a somewhat or very positive role in society. While this sentiment has remained stable since 2023, maintaining this level of optimism amid the rapid evolution – and increasing scrutiny – of AI technologies suggests that students continue to see significant value and opportunity in these tools.

Figure 11. Students' familiarity with Generative AI tools

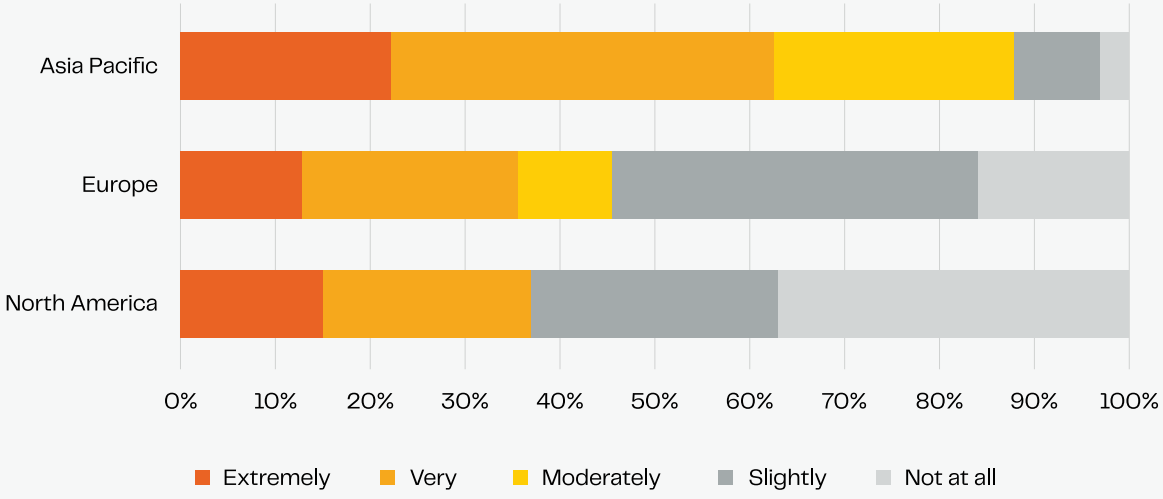


Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

As with academics, regional differences are pronounced. Students in the Asia Pacific region report the highest levels of familiarity with Generative AI tools (Figure 12) and the most positive perceptions of AI's role in society. By contrast, students in Europe – and especially North America – are considerably more cautious.

More than half of students in both regions express somewhat negative or negative views about AI's societal impact, compared with just 12% of students in Asia Pacific reporting negative sentiment (Figure 12). These findings point to important regional differences in confidence, adoption and trust that institutions may need to account for when developing AI strategies and student support approaches.

Figure 12. Students' perception of Generative AI's role in society

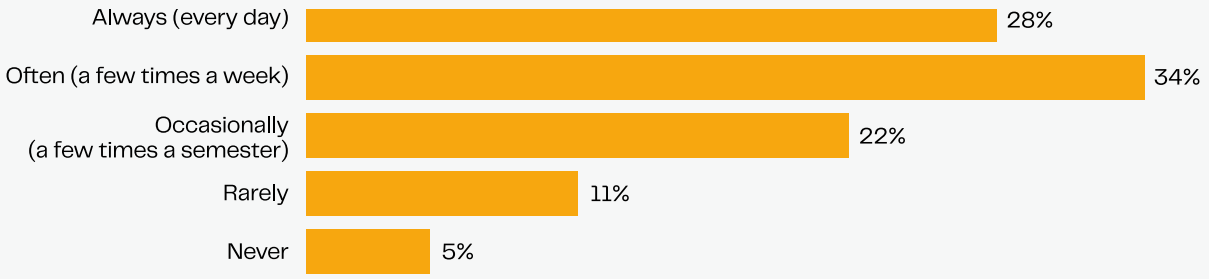


Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

Usage of Generative AI

Generative AI is now firmly embedded in student learning behaviour. Nearly two-thirds of students (62%) report using Generative AI in their coursework or studies at least once a week, while only 5% say they never use these tools (Figure 13). Reflecting this widespread adoption, students overwhelmingly believe universities should actively incorporate Generative AI into teaching and learning, with 94% saying it is at least somewhat important for institutions to do so.

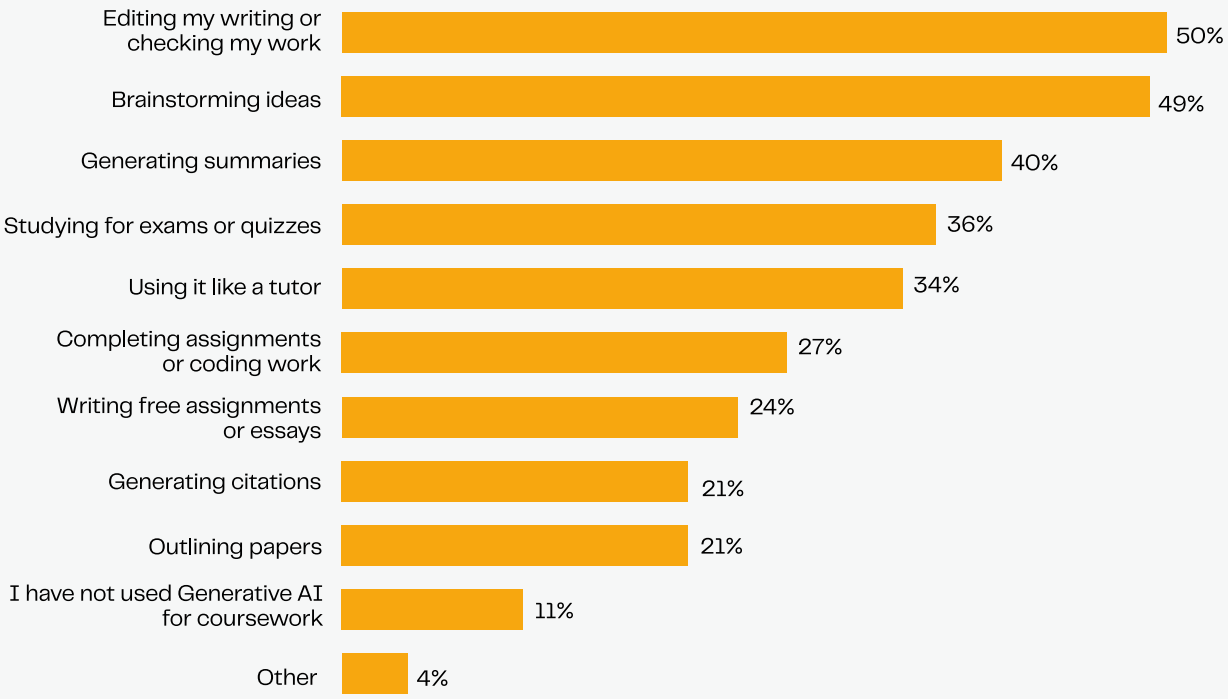
Figure 13. How often do your use Generative AI tools for your university coursework or study?



Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

Students' most common uses of Generative AI centre on research support and content creation, highlighting the extent to which these tools are influencing how students gather information, structure ideas and produce academic work. Notably, almost one-quarter of respondents (24%) say they use Generative AI to help write essays (Figure 14).

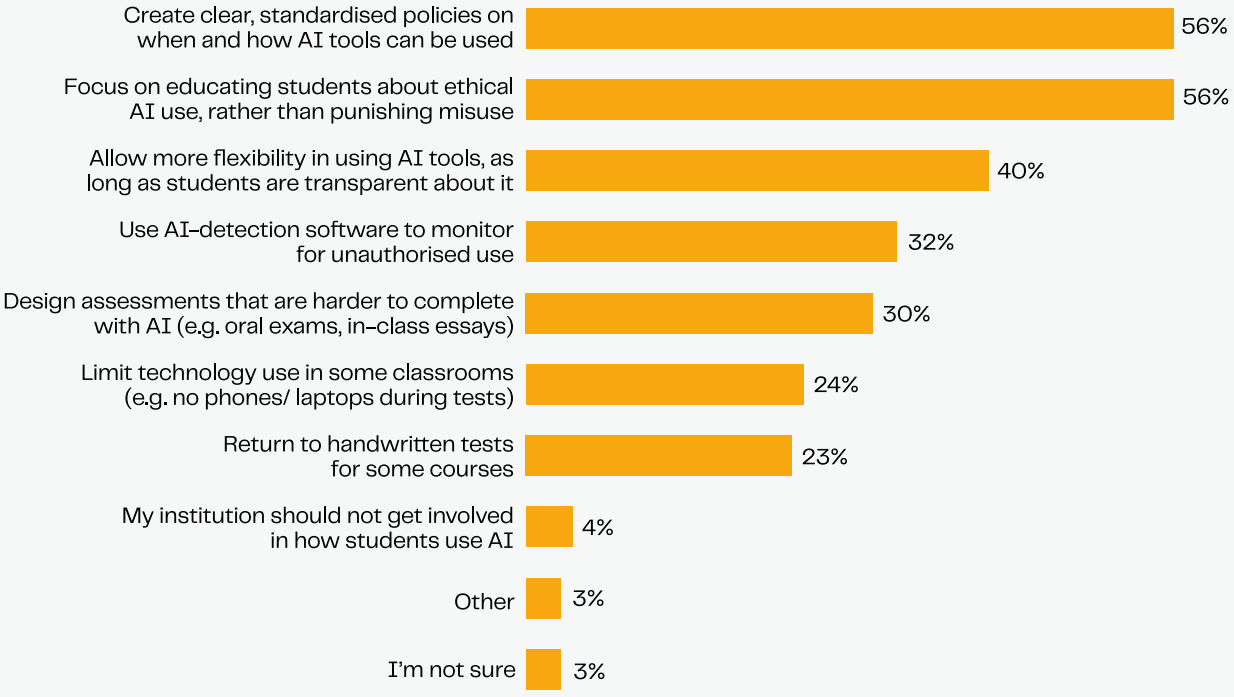
Figure 14. In which of the following ways have you used Generative AI (e.g. ChatGPT) for your coursework in the past year?



Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

These findings reinforce the growing need for universities to rethink approaches to assessment, academic integrity and authentic demonstration of learning. Importantly, students themselves appear aware of these challenges. 30% say universities should design assessments that are more difficult to complete using AI tools alone (Figure 15), suggesting many students value authenticity in assessment and are concerned about the potential for AI to undermine the credibility, fairness and long-term value of their qualifications.

Figure 15. What approaches do you think your college or university should take to address academic integrity in the age of Generative AI?



Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

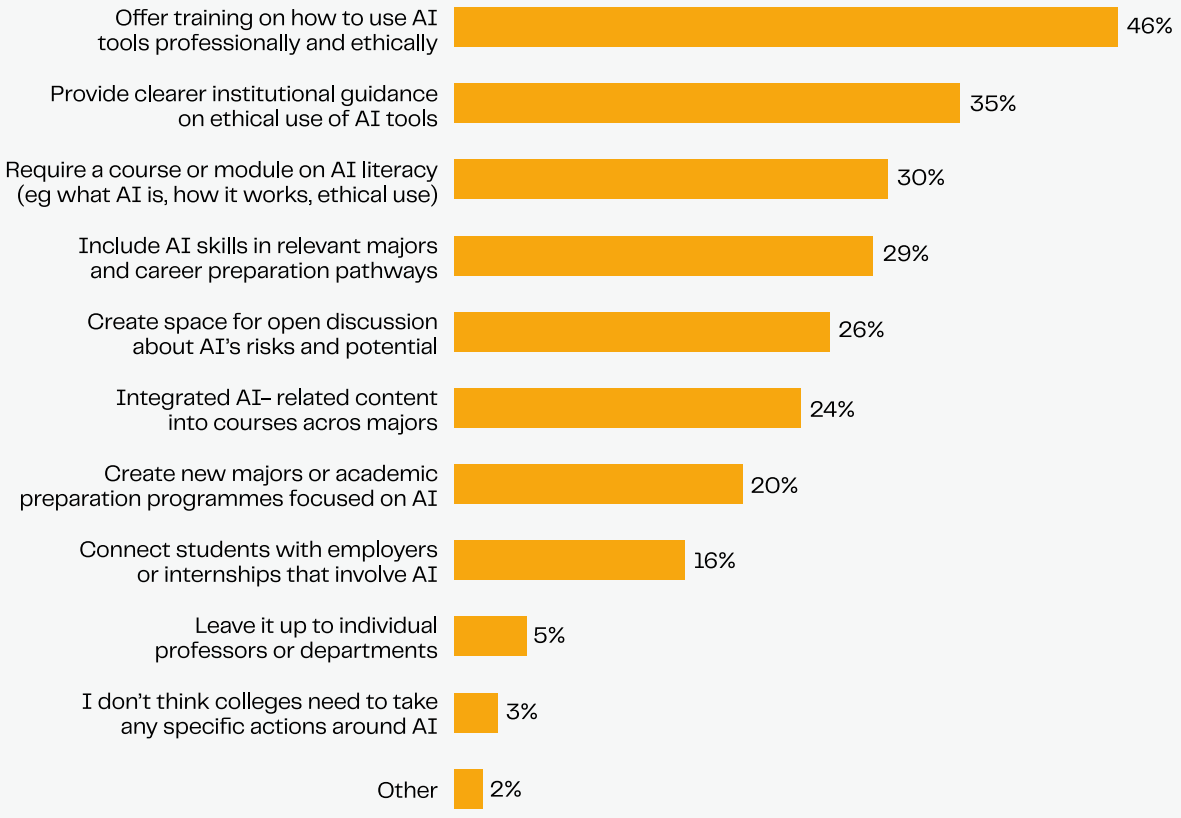
Institutional priorities

Given how deeply embedded Generative AI has become in student learning, it is unsurprising that students are also calling for clearer guidance and support around its responsible use. More than half of respondents (56%) say universities should introduce standardised policies on how AI can be used, alongside education on ethical and appropriate AI practices.

At the same time, students are not seeking overly restrictive approaches. Many are advocating for policies that balance integrity with flexibility and transparency. Four in ten students (40%) say universities should allow greater flexibility in the use of AI tools, provided students clearly disclose how and where AI has been used in their work (Figure 15). Together, these findings suggest students are looking for institutions to move beyond simple prohibition or enforcement models, toward clearer, more practical frameworks that support responsible and transparent AI use within learning and assessment.

When asked how universities can best prepare them for an AI-augmented future, students place the strongest emphasis on practical capability development and ethical guidance. Almost half of respondents (46%) say they want training in how to use AI tools professionally and ethically, highlighting a clear expectation that universities will help students develop responsible, workplace-relevant AI skills (Figure 16). In addition, 30% support the introduction of mandatory courses or modules focused on AI literacy, including understanding how AI works, its limitations, and the ethical considerations surrounding its use.

Figure 16. What do you think your college or university should do to help students prepare for a future shaped by Generative AI?



Source: QS Generative AI Pulse Survey 2025

Conclusion

Across both surveys, a strong point of alignment emerges: Students and academics alike believe Generative AI should be integrated into higher education within clear ethical, institutional and pedagogical frameworks. While academics express concerns around ethics, governance, assessment integrity and data security, students are equally clear that they want transparent policies, practical guidance and education on responsible AI use – rather than restrictive or punitive approaches.

The findings also demonstrate that Generative AI is no longer an emerging issue for higher education; it is already embedded in everyday academic and student practice. AI tools are now routinely used for research, teaching preparation, assessment support, study assistance and content creation. The challenge for institutions is therefore shifting from whether AI should be addressed to how universities can respond strategically, responsibly and at scale.

At the same time, the report highlights important regional differences in familiarity, trust and perceptions of AI's role in society. As higher education becomes increasingly global and interconnected, institutions will need to avoid overly rigid or one-size-fits-all approaches. Instead, universities should establish shared ethical principles and governance frameworks that can flex across cultural, regulatory and institutional contexts.

A further theme running consistently throughout the findings is the growing importance of AI literacy as a core graduate capability. Students are not only using AI extensively today, but increasingly expect universities to help them develop the skills to use these tools critically, ethically and professionally in the workplace. This places AI capability alongside digital literacy, critical thinking and communication as an essential component of future-ready education.

Ultimately, the institutions best positioned for the future will be those that move beyond reactive policy responses and instead build coordinated, institution-wide approaches to responsible AI adoption. Universities that invest now in ethical frameworks, staff capability, authentic assessment design and practical student guidance will be better placed to protect academic integrity while unlocking the opportunities AI presents for teaching, learning and research.

Key actions

1. Establish clear institutional governance for AI

Universities should implement institution-wide frameworks for Generative AI that provide clear guidance on ethics, data security, acceptable use, transparency and attribution expectations. Governance approaches should balance consistency with sufficient flexibility for disciplinary and regional contexts.

2. Redesign assessment for an AI-enabled environment

Assessment strategies and academic integrity processes should evolve to reflect the realities of widespread AI use. This may include greater emphasis on authentic assessment, applied and in-class activities, oral defence, iterative project work, and clearer guidance on when and how AI support is permitted.

3. Embed AI literacy across the student experience

AI literacy should become a foundational graduate capability embedded throughout the curriculum. Universities should provide students with practical training on how to use AI critically, ethically and professionally, including understanding AI limitations, bias, verification and responsible decision-making.

4. Invest in staff capability and institutional readiness

Many academics identify skills, capability and resourcing gaps as barriers to effective AI adoption. Institutions should prioritise professional development, practical training and access to appropriate tools and support systems to help staff confidently integrate AI into teaching, research and administration.

5. Develop transparent and student-centred AI policies

Students are calling for clarity, consistency and transparency rather than blanket restrictions. Universities should co-design practical AI policies that encourage responsible use, support disclosure and transparency, and clearly communicate expectations to both students and staff.

6. Build adaptive strategies for a rapidly evolving landscape

The pace of AI development means institutional strategies cannot remain static. Universities should establish ongoing review mechanisms, sector partnerships and collaborative forums to continually evaluate emerging technologies, risks and opportunities as AI capabilities evolve.

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- AI Capability Assessment
- QS Innovation Datasets

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Methodology

This briefing draws on two global pulse surveys fielded by QS. The figures presented reflect self-reported responses collected during the fieldwork periods below.

Survey	Respondents	Countries represented	Fieldwork period
Academic survey	634 responses	86 countries	Oct – Nov 2025
Student survey	627 responses	99 countries	Dec 2025 – Jan 2026

This is the second iteration of the QS AI Sentiment surveys and offers an unparalleled view into the perspectives of students and academics on the use of AI in the sector. The most recent iteration draws on responses from 634 Academics and 627 prospective students from 86 and 99 locations around the world.

The questions in the survey are designed to enable higher education institutions to effectively understand what students and academics think about AI and how it can be used across the sector. To understand what matters most, we ask a wide range of questions about their current feelings towards AI in general, but also how they feel about how AI should be implemented as part of the learning and development process for students.

The consistency in our questioning across academics and students also enables us to compare how different audiences feel towards the use of AI and what it's focus should be for students.

This year, we invited respondents from our QS Academic Reputation Survey and QS International Student Survey to participate in this valuable piece of follow up research. Fieldwork for the survey was conducted between October 2025 and January 2026 via Qualtrics, an online survey management platform. The survey contains 10 unique questions covering all aspects of how respondents feel towards the use of AI in higher education.

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