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POLICY REPORT

AI Use in Higher Education

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"*A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention*." Herbert A. Simon

The increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education has raised questions about academic integrity, institutional policies, and student learning. Recent evidence documents widespread AI adoption among university students, although institutional guidance and access to AI-related training remain uneven. The Higher Education Policy Institute reports that 95% of surveyed UK undergraduates used AI in some capacity in 2026, while only 36% felt encouraged by their institutions to do so (Stephenson & Armstrong, 2026). Kasneci et al. (2023) identify opportunities for personalized learning and academic support while emphasizing the need for clear educational policies, critical thinking, and responsible AI use. Similar concerns emerge in the Lumina Foundation-Gallup (2026) report, which documents a discrepancy between students' AI adoption and institutional restrictions. Beyond institutional policies, AI use also varies across academic disciplines, raising questions about how these differences relate to students' perceptions of AI-related changes in employment. Drawing on the Lumina Foundation-Gallup findings, this commentary applies heatmap visualization and exploratory K-means clustering to examine disciplinary patterns of AI adoption, consideration of changing majors, and reported major changes. The analysis informs a discussion of discipline-sensitive AI policies, institutional governance, and career preparation in higher education.

The Lumina Foundation-Gallup (2026) report, AI in Higher Education: *Widespread Use, Unclear Rules,* draws on a survey of 3,801 students pursuing associate or bachelor's degrees in the United States, conducted from October 2 through October 31, 2025. The report finds that 57% use AI for coursework at least weekly, while only 13% never use it. Yet 53% report that their institutions discourage or prohibit AI use, and 52% indicate that at least some of their courses lack clear AI policies. Among students whose institutions reportedly encourage unrestricted AI use, 87% use AI at least weekly, compared with 48% at institutions that discourage AI and 27% at institutions that prohibit it. While institutional policies are associated with students' reported AI use, these cross-sectional findings do not establish causality. Institutional culture, coursework demands, and student preferences may also influence AI adoption. Students' reasons for using AI further complicate assumptions that AI assistance necessarily constitutes academic dishonesty. Among students who use AI at least monthly, 86% identify understanding complex course material as an extremely or very important reason, while 76% cite saving time and 70% cite improving grades. These responses document students' perceived motivations but do not establish whether AI use improves their learning outcomes.

Comparative survey evidence also provides additional context for examining institutional policies and disciplinary differences. Table 1 compares the Lumina Foundation-Gallup survey with three other studies of AI use in higher education. Freeman's (2025) survey of 1,041 UK undergraduates' documents disciplinary variation in AI adoption and perceptions of AI-generated academic work. Students in STEM and health-related programs reported greater confidence in the academic quality of AI-generated work than students in arts and humanities. The Lumina Foundation–Gallup (2026) report similarly identifies differences across disciplines, with business (70%), technology (68%), and engineering (65%) reporting the highest rates of weekly AI use. The Digital Education Council (2024) offers an international perspective, documenting concerns about students' AI-related skills and perceived workforce readiness. Though these surveys differ in their populations, sampling approaches, and measures of AI use, they provide complementary evidence of uneven institutional support and disciplinary variation. These differences warrant closer examination of how academic fields compare in AI adoption and students' concerns about their future careers.

The disciplinary differences documented in these surveys raise an important question: *Do academic fields exhibit distinct patterns of AI adoption and perceived career disruption*? To examine this question, I use a heatmap (Figure 1) and an exploratory K-means clustering analysis of nine academic

fields (Figure 2), drawing on three indicators reported by the Lumina Foundation–Gallup (2026) survey: (1) the percentage of students using AI at least weekly, (2) the percentage who have given a great deal or a fair amount of consideration to changing majors because of AI, and (3) the percentage who report having changed majors. The heatmap presents the original percentages across academic fields without imposing a statistical model. Weekly AI use is highest among business (70%), technology (68%), and engineering (65%) students, compared with 49% in natural sciences and 43% in humanities. Career-related concerns, however, follow a different pattern. Approximately 71% of vocational students and 70% of technology students report having seriously considered changing their majors because of AI, compared with 34% in healthcare and natural sciences. Students in vocational and technology programs also report the highest rates of having changed majors because of AI (26% and 25%, respectively). These differences provide the basis for examining whether academic fields share similar profiles of AI adoption and career-related concerns.

Table 1. ***Comparison of Student AI Adoption Surveys in Higher Education***

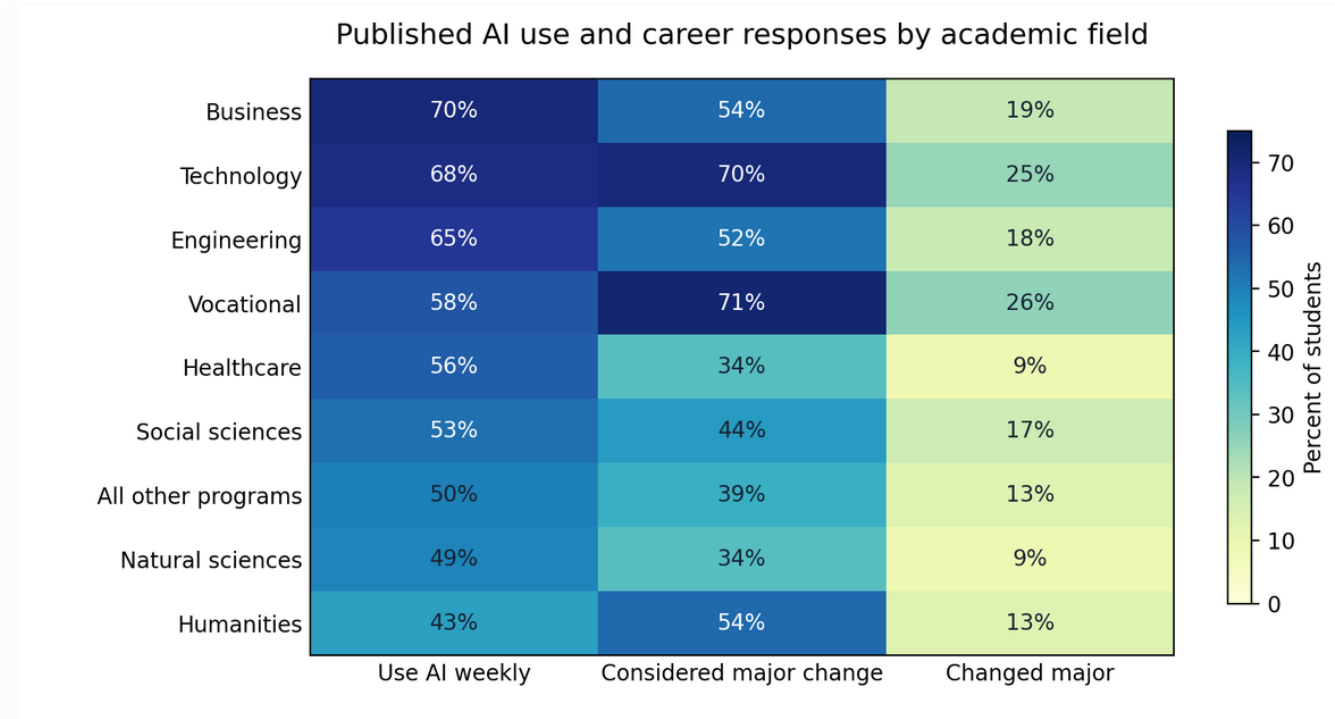
Study	**Sample and geographic coverage**	**Key findings**
Lumina Foundation–Gallup (2026): **Primary study**	*N* = 3,801; U.S. associate and bachelor's degree students; surveyed October 2025	57% use AI at least weekly; 53% report that their institutions discourage or prohibit AI; 52% report unclear AI policies in at least some courses; 47% have seriously considered changing majors because of AI.
Freeman (2025)	*N* = 1,041; UK undergraduate students; surveyed December 2024	92% report using AI in some capacity; 88% have used GenAI for assessments; 29% feel encouraged by their institutions to use AI; 36% report receiving institutional AI-skills training.
Stephenson and Armstrong (2026)	*N* = 1,054; UK undergraduate students; surveyed December 2025	95% report using AI in at least one way; 94% use GenAI to assist with assessed work; 36% feel encouraged by their institutions to use AI.
Digital Education Council (2024)	*N* = 3,839; undergraduate and postgraduate students across 16 countries	86% report regular AI use; 58% report insufficient AI knowledge and skills; 48% feel inadequately prepared for an AI-enabled workplace.

To explore similarity across fields, I standardized the three percentages and applied K-means with three clusters ($K = 3$) in Figure 2. Standardization inhibits the indicator with the largest numerical spread from automatically dominating Euclidean distances[1]. The cluster count is an illustrative choice, not a validated estimate of the number of underlying student types. *Cluster 1* groups Technology, Vocational. *Cluster 2* groups Business, Engineering. *Cluster 3* groups Healthcare, Social sciences, All other programs, Natural sciences, Humanities. The clusters organize the aggregate patterns into contrasting disciplinary profiles. Their value is primarily comparative[2]. The first cluster, comprising technology and vocational programs, exhibits relatively high levels of concern about changing majors and the highest rates of reported major changes. The second cluster, consisting of business and engineering programs, is characterized by higher weekly AI adoption and more moderate career-related concerns, while the third cluster includes disciplines with generally lower AI adoption and reported major changes, although considerable variation remains within this group. An academic field's position in the figure should not be used to infer the motives or decisions of an individual student. The original respondent-level survey

[1] Euclidean distance is the straight-line distance between two points in a plane or higher-dimensional space.
[2] The grouping makes it easier to see where frequent AI use coincides with concern about career change and where adoption occurs with less reported concern.

data and sampling weights would be needed to estimate student-level clusters, assess uncertainty and evaluate the robustness of the classification.

Figure 1. Heatmap of reported subgroup percentages[3]



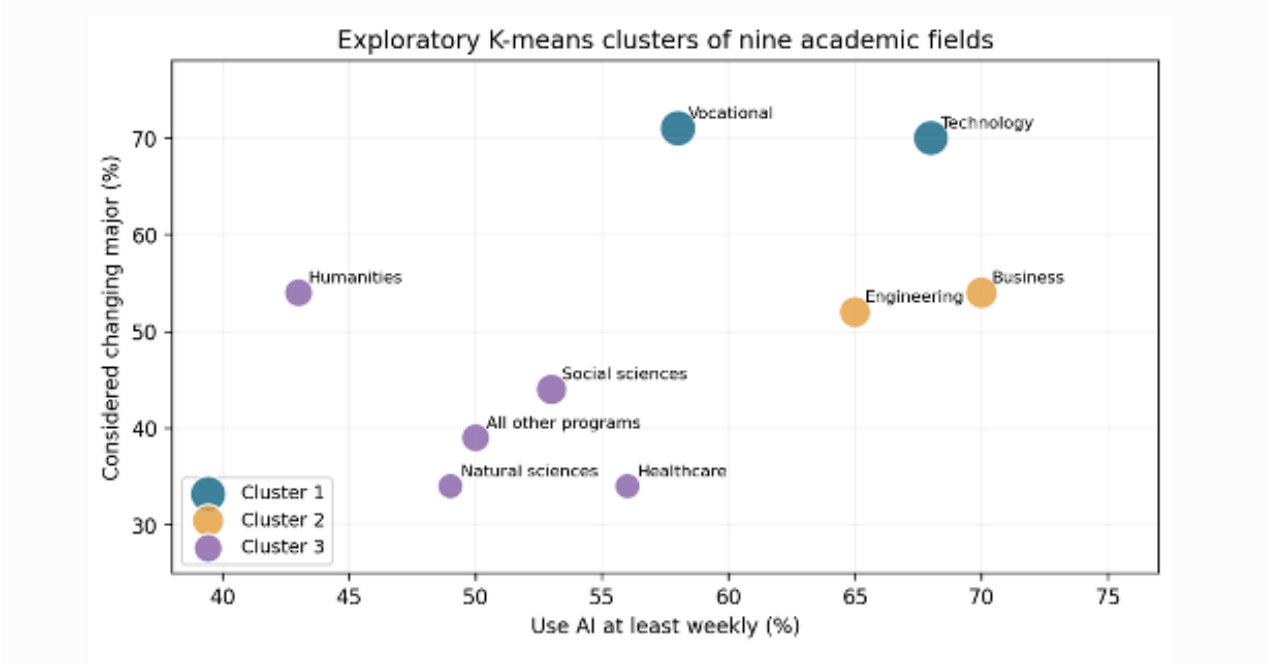
The disciplinary patterns identified in the heatmap and K-means analysis raise questions about how universities should respond to differences in AI adoption and career-related concerns. Beyond these disciplinary differences, the Lumina Foundation-Gallup (2026) report identifies persistent gaps in institutional guidance and AI training. 29% of students report receiving insufficient AI training, a figure that rises to 43% among those uncertain of their institution's AI policy. Though the survey does not establish whether encouraging or restricting AI improves educational outcomes, the findings provide grounds for reconsidering how institutions communicate acceptable AI use and prepare students to engage with the technology responsibly. Universities should therefore establish clear, consistent, and discipline-sensitive policies that distinguish acceptable AI-assisted learning from practices that compromise academic integrity. The following recommendations address institutional governance, disciplinary differences, AI literacy, career preparation, and policy evaluation.

First, institutions should adopt clear, course-specific AI policies within a common institutional framework. Miao and Holmes (2023), in UNESCO's guidance on generative AI in education and research, emphasize the need for institutional policies that address ethical considerations, data privacy, and the responsible use of AI in educational settings. Universities should establish minimum standards for AI disclosure, acceptable assistance, and academic integrity while allowing faculty to specify how AI may be used in individual assignments. This approach would reduce uncertainty without imposing identical requirements across disciplines. Students should know whether AI may be used for brainstorming, explaining concepts, programming, data analysis, or preparing written assignments, and when such assistance must be acknowledged.

[3] Source: Lumina Foundation-Gallup (2026), Chart 1, 8 and 9. Values are rounded subgroup percentages.

Second, AI policies should account for disciplinary differences in adoption and academic expectations. The Lumina Foundation-Gallup findings indicate that weekly AI use is particularly common among business (70%), technology (68%), and engineering (65%) students. These patterns support developing discipline-sensitive guidance that considers the learning objectives and assessment practices of different fields. Institutions should involve faculty and students in developing departmental guidelines, while maintaining shared standards of transparency and academic accountability. The exploratory heatmap and K-means analysis presented in this commentary may help identify disciplinary profiles that warrant closer policy attention, though the aggregate data cannot establish individual student needs.

Figure 2. K-means grouping of academic fields[4]



Third, institutions should integrate AI literacy into academic instruction and career preparation. The Lumina Foundation-Gallup report finds that 29% of students believe their institutions provide insufficient AI training, with this concern reaching 39% among students at institutions that prohibit AI use. UNESCO's AI Competency Framework for Students identifies competencies related to a human-centered mindset, AI ethics, AI techniques and applications, and AI system design (Miao et al., 2024). Similarly, Student Defense (2026) pinpoints concerns about inaccurate AI-generated information, algorithmic bias, student privacy, and the potential erosion of independent judgment and human interaction in educational settings. Universities should provide structured opportunities to evaluate AI-generated information, recognize inaccuracies and bias, understand data privacy risks, and determine when independent reasoning is necessary. Such instruction should extend beyond technical proficiency to include critical assessment of AI-generated outputs.

Fourth, universities should address AI-related career uncertainty through academic advising and workforce preparation. The Lumina Foundation-Gallup report finds that 70% of technology students have given at least a fair amount of consideration to changing their majors because of AI's potential impact on the labor market, while 25% report having already changed majors. These

[4]Bubble area represents reported major changes.

concerns are particularly relevant given the World Economic Forum's (2025) projection that 39% of workers' existing skill sets will change or become outdated by 2030. The OECD (2025) also emphasizes the need for comprehensive career guidance that helps individuals make informed educational and employment decisions in response to changing labor-market demands. Universities should therefore integrate AI-related labor-market information into academic advising, provide discipline-specific career guidance, and help students distinguish between occupations vulnerable to automation and those likely to undergo changes in job tasks. Rather than encouraging students to abandon academic fields, institutions should provide evidence-based information about occupational prospects and opportunities to develop skills that complement AI. Regular assessments of students' career expectations could also help universities identify emerging concerns and adjust academic and career-support services accordingly.

Finally, universities should regularly evaluate the implementation of their AI policies through student and faculty surveys, course-level assessments, and measures of AI literacy. Student Defense (2026) calls for institutions to examine the risks of AI deployment, ensure transparency, monitor outcomes, and maintain human in the lead accountability in decisions affecting students. Institutional evaluation should examine whether students understand existing rules, whether training is accessible across disciplines, and whether AI-supported learning is consistent with educational objectives. Because the Lumina Foundation-Gallup (2026) study is cross-sectional, its findings cannot establish the causal effects of institutional policies on student behavior. Future evaluations should consequently assess changes in policy clarity, AI literacy, and learning outcomes over time. A consistent institutional response requires clear expectations, discipline-sensitive implementation, and regular evaluation. The policy objective should be to ensure that students can use AI responsibly while preserving independent judgment, academic integrity, and the learning objectives of higher education.

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