



# AI Strategy Compass



## IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

A framework for comprehensive AI  
implementation in higher education

# AI Strategy Compass



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## Foreword: A guide written from the inside out

This guide was not written from a distance.

Everything in it comes from lived experience, three years of implementing AI transformation at Breda University of Applied Sciences (BUAs) in the Netherlands, navigating the same pressures, questions, and uncertainties that most universities are facing right now. It was written by someone who was both leading the implementation and researching it simultaneously, which means it carries both the confidence of practice and the humility of someone who kept discovering what they didn't yet know.

The AI Strategy Compass (AISC) is a six-component approach to institution-wide AI transformation in higher education: Urgency, Ambition + Strategy, AI Pioneer Team, Programmatic Approach, Communication, and Cultural Change. It emerged not from a desk, but from practice, iteratively shaped by what worked, what didn't, and what surprised us along the way. This guide makes that experience available to you in a form you can actually use: structured for the practitioner who needs to move from orientation to action.

Breda, The Netherlands  
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# WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR

This guide is for people in higher education who are responsible for, or seriously thinking about, institution-wide AI implementation. That might mean you are:

- An AI programme manager or coordinator
- A member of a teaching and learning centre
- A dean or academic director empowered to act
- A director or executive board member trying to make sense of strategic options
- A policy advisor trying to move from position paper to practice

Wherever you sit in your institution, this guide asks something of you specifically. AI transformation does not become real at the level of institutional strategy, it becomes real when Faculty-level leadership asks what this ambition means for their domain, when a programme team defines what AI-capable graduates look like in their specific field, when a lecturer works out what changes in how they teach, assess, and relate to their students. The AISC gives institutions a shared direction. What makes that direction meaningful is the translation work that happens at every level.

You don't need to be a technical expert. The AISC is not a technology approach, it is a cultural change approach. The challenge it addresses is not which AI tools to deploy but how to shift the way people think, work, and relate to their practice, so that AI can be integrated meaningfully, ethically, and sustainably.

# WHAT THIS GUIDE IS, AND WHAT IT ISN'T

This is a practical implementation guide, grounded in one institution's real experience. It will give you a structure to work with, questions to ask at each stage, and honest accounts of what happened when we tried things, including what didn't go as planned.

It is not a blueprint to copy exactly. BUas is a medium-sized, single-campus university of applied sciences in the Netherlands. Your governance structure, your culture, your starting point, and your resources will be different. All six components of the AISC are necessary, they work as an interconnected whole, and leaving one out creates gaps that undermine the others. What adapts to your context is how you implement each component, not which ones you include.

**It is also not a finished story.**

AI implementation is not a project with a completion date, it is an ongoing institutional capacity. What BUas built between 2023 and 2025 was a strong foundation. What came next was the realisation that organisational readiness and human readiness are not the same thing, and that the latter is the harder, more important frontier. This guide will take you through the implementation journey and be honest about where that frontier lies.



# UNDERSTANDING THE COMPASS

## 1.1 What the AISC is and where it came from

The AI Strategy Compass did not begin as a structured approach. **It began as a challenge.**

In early 2023, Breda University of Applied Sciences was facing what most universities were facing: the arrival of generative AI had disrupted assumptions about teaching, assessment, academic integrity, and professional practice almost overnight. The question wasn't whether to respond, it was how to respond in a way that was coherent, values-driven, and built to last rather than reactive and fragmented.

The decision made at BUAs was to treat AI not primarily as a technology challenge but as a cultural change challenge. Organisational structures were built to create the conditions for that change, but the change itself is human: how people think, work, and relate to their practice.

That reframe, from 'what tools do we deploy?' to 'how do we change as an institution?', shaped everything that followed. The AISC emerged from navigating that transformation in real time, and was iteratively refined through practice, reflection, and systematic research over three years.

What distinguishes the AISC from many AI approaches is its integration of two dimensions that are often treated separately: the structural and the human. Many approaches focus on either the technical and procedural aspects of implementation, tools, policies, governance, or the cultural and behavioural dimensions, mindsets, norms, relationships. The AISC addresses both, recognising that neither alone is sufficient for lasting transformation.

It is also explicitly a compass rather than a map. A map tells you exactly where to go. A compass tells you which direction you're facing and helps you navigate, but the path depends on your terrain. The AISC gives you orientation and a structure to work within, while leaving the specific path to your institutional context, culture, and capacity.

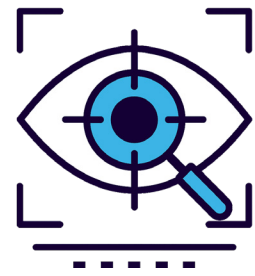
The AISC was not designed to solve a technology problem. It was built on the belief about human change: that the relevance of people and therefore of institutions depends on how well individuals understand and leverage their own capabilities alongside AI. The organisational structures the AISC builds exist to enable that human change. They are a means, not the end. The change the AISC seeks happens in how people think, work, and relate to their practice — and the compass is designed to make that possible.

A note on the language used in the Orientation Scan in Part 2. The four levels, Not present, Activity, Process, and Mature, describe the coherence and depth of what an institution can build across each component.

A note on the language used in the Orientation Scan in Part 2. The three levels, Activity, Process, and Mature, describe the coherence and depth of what an institution can build across each component. They are not steps toward a known destination. We do not yet know what a fully transformed AI institution looks like.

The AISC begins at institutional level and it cannot stay there. The first phase of implementation is necessarily about building the foundation: leadership mandate, strategic coherence, institutional infrastructure, and a pioneers network that can carry the work. Without that foundation, efforts at academy and programme level fragment and lose momentum.

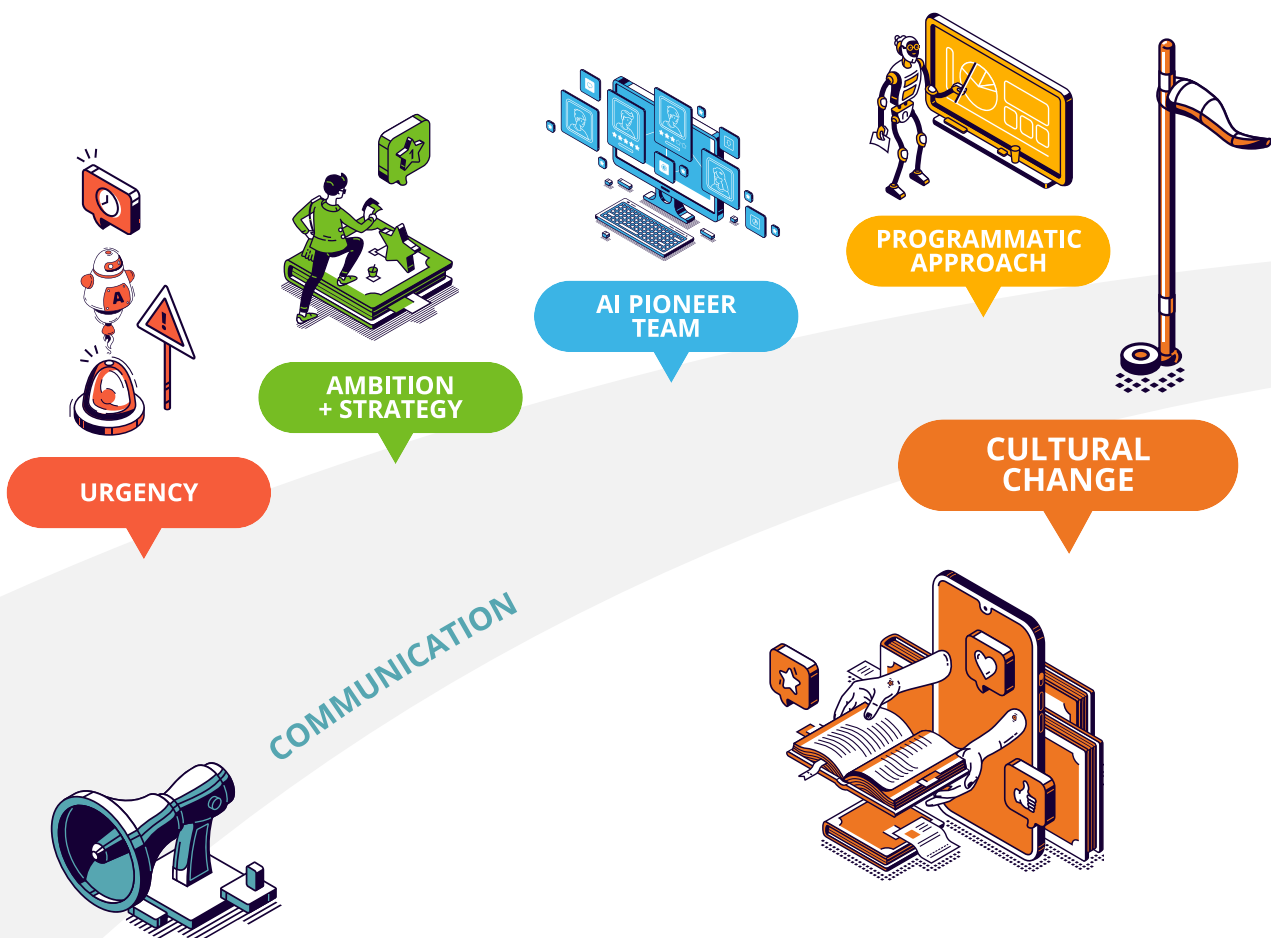
But foundation-building is not the destination. Once the institutional conditions are in place, the real work of translation begins, from institution to academy (e.g. faculty/school), from academy to programme, from programme to course. At each level, the strategy has to be reinterpreted, not just received. Academy directors ask what this ambition means for their domain. Programme teams define what AI-capable graduates look like in their specific field. Individual lecturers work out what changes in how they teach, assess, and relate to students.



At BUAs, Phase 1, building the institutional foundation, was complete by the end of 2025. Phase 2 is already underway. The Pioneer Team, always composed of one pioneer per academy working as both a central group and an academy-embedded presence, shifted their focus from building the shared institutional foundation to driving concrete implementation within their own domains, acting as curriculum translators and peer advisors for their colleagues. A comprehensive Vision on Teaching and Learning with AI was completed, giving every academy a concrete pedagogical and assessment structure to work with rather than abstract institutional ambition. In operations, a decentralised model replaced centralised delivery, with department-specific AI use cases and locally led experiments replacing generic tool access. The foundation made this possible. It did not make it automatic.

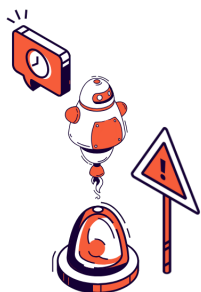


# AI Strategy Compass



## 1.2 The six components at a glance

The AISC comprises six interconnected components. Each addresses a distinct dimension of institutional transformation, and together they create the conditions for sustainable, values-driven AI integration.



### URGENCY

Creating shared recognition that AI represents both opportunity and challenge requiring collective response.

Not panic, but engaged awareness. Without urgency, everything else stalls. That urgency has a specific character: AI does not simply add new tools to existing ways of working — it asks people to fundamentally reinvent how they work, what they contribute, and which skills matter.



### AMBITION + STRATEGY

Channelling urgency into direction.

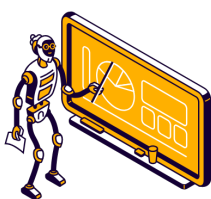
What kind of institution do you want to be in relation to AI? Strategy without ambition is just bureaucracy; ambition without strategy is just aspiration. The strategy must incorporate a roadmap for all levels of the organisation, not just an overall institutional direction, so that ambition can come alive in daily practice.



### AI PIONEER TEAM

Building a distributed leadership network of change agents who bridge institutional strategy and everyday practice.

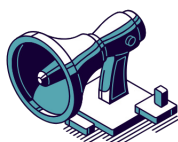
Pioneers are trusted colleagues who model curiosity, hold space for uncertainty, and make AI feel relevant and safe to engage with in their own domains. They were not chosen because they had all the answers. They were chosen because they understood the transition.



### PROGRAMMATIC APPROACH

Coordinating multiple initiatives within a coherent structure so they reinforce each other rather than competing or fragmenting.

The difference between isolated pilots and an actual programme that creates institutional momentum. The programmatic approach is where strategy becomes translated into actionable plans.



### COMMUNICATION

Not broadcast messaging, but the ongoing work of creating shared meaning.

How an institution talks about AI, what stories it tells, whose voices it includes, how it handles fear and resistance, shapes how people relate to the transformation itself.



### CULTURAL CHANGE

The deepest and slowest dimension.

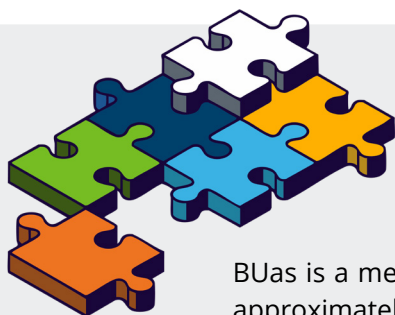
AI integration requires shifts in assumptions, norms, behaviours, and practices, from AI-as-threat to AI-as-tool requiring judgment, from individual autonomy to collaborative practice, from certainty to adaptive capacity.

### 1.3 How the components work together

The six components are not a sequence. You do not finish Urgency before starting Ambition + Strategy. In practice, all six operate simultaneously and each reinforces the others.

Urgency and Ambition + Strategy operate primarily at the institutional level, they create direction and permission. The Pioneers Team and Communication operate primarily at the relational level, they create connection and meaning across the institution. The Programmatic Approach coordinates the work itself. Cultural Change runs underneath all of it, both shaped by and shaping everything else.

The components also have important interdependencies. A Pioneers Team without strategic direction becomes a group of enthusiasts with no mandate. A Programmatic Approach without Cultural Change produces initiatives that get compliance but not engagement.



### 1.4 The BUAs context, calibrating to your own situation

BUAs is a medium-sized university of applied sciences in Breda, the Netherlands, with approximately 7,500 students and staff across five academies spanning nine domains including games, tourism, logistics, media, and built environment. It operates under a single-campus structure with a centralised executive board. It is a practice-oriented institution with strong industry connections and a culture that values innovation and doing.

When the AISC implementation began in early 2023, BUAs had no formal AI policy, no designated AI leadership, and no coordinated programme. What it did have was a small number of curious, motivated individuals, including an executive board willing to make AI a strategic priority, and an institutional culture that was open to experimentation.

By the end of 2025, BUAs had built comprehensive organisational infrastructure across all six AISC components: a functioning Pioneers network, a phased strategic roadmap, institution-wide AI tool access, tiered training programmes, curriculum approaches with AI-specific learning outcomes, an ethics policy, and active communication across multiple channels.

What that experience also revealed is that organisational infrastructure and genuine human readiness are not the same thing. You can build the systems and still find that people are not yet truly engaging. That gap is something we only understood fully through implementation, and it is something you will need to hold in mind as you build.

Your context will differ from BUAs's in important ways. Larger institutions face different coordination challenges. Multi-campus universities have different governance dynamics. Research-intensive universities have different cultures and incentive structures. All six components are required, but how you implement each one will look different depending on your governance structure, culture, and starting point. That is where your context shapes the work.

# GETTING STARTED

## Before you pick up the compass

There is a temptation, when you discover a new approach, to immediately start mapping it onto your institution. Resist that temptation for a moment. The AISC is not a checklist to execute. It is a compass, it shows you direction and helps you orient, but the path depends on your terrain. Before you start using it, you need to understand where you are standing.

### 2.1 Are you ready to start?

Not every institution is in the same place. Before doing anything else, take stock honestly by asking yourself the following questions.

#### ON LEADERSHIP

Does your executive leadership see Artificial Intelligence as a strategic priority, or mainly as a compliance issue?

Is there someone at board or senior management level willing to publicly sponsor and champion this work?

Would leadership allocate dedicated resources, people, time, budget, to a structured implementation effort?

#### ON YOUR INSTITUTION

Do you currently have any AI-related policies, guidelines, or positions, even informal ones?

Are there colleagues already experimenting with AI in their teaching, research, or operations work?

Is there a shared sense of why this matters, or is urgency mostly absent or is driven by anxiety?

#### ON CAPACITY

Is there someone who can take genuine ownership of coordinating this work as a meaningful part of their role?

Do you have, or can you identify, people across different parts of the institution who could serve as change agents?

You don't need to answer yes to all of these. But if most answers are no, then your first work isn't implementing the AISC, it's building the basic conditions that make implementation possible.

That means starting with the first component:

**URGENCY**



## 2.2 The AISC Orientation Scan

Before deciding where to focus, it helps to understand where you actually are. The Orientation Scan below lets you map your institution across all six AISC components against four levels of development.

	NOT PRESENT	ACTIVITY	PROCESS	SUSTAINABLE
URGENCY	AI is not on the institutional agenda. No one is actively building a case for why this matters, and leadership has not engaged with the question.	AI is discussed reactively, triggered by external news or individual enthusiasm. No shared institutional narrative about why AI matters.	Leadership has articulated a position on AI. Some shared language exists but urgency is unevenly felt across departments.	The institution maintains a natural state of preparedness for emerging AI developments and societal changes.
AMBITION + STRATEGY	No institutional position on AI exists. There is no strategy, no stated ambition, and no process underway to develop one.	No institutional AI strategy exists. Individual departments or people set their own direction informally.	A strategy document exists and has been approved. Ambition is stated but not yet translated into concrete priorities or phased plans.	AI strategy is living and operational, embedded in institutional planning cycles, reviewed regularly, and understood across leadership levels.
AI PIONEER TEAM	No one has been identified or asked to lead AI development. There is no pioneer function, formal or informal.	A few enthusiastic individuals act informally as AI advocates. No structure, no mandate, no protected time.	A pioneer group has been identified and meets regularly. Roles are emerging but not yet formally embedded in governance or given sufficient protected time.	Pioneers are a recognised distributed leadership network with clear roles, protected capacity, and strong relational connections across all domains.
PROGRAMMATIC APPROACH	No initiatives, pilots, or coordination exist around AI. The institution has not begun structuring its efforts.	Initiatives are scattered and uncoordinated, dependent on individual champions. No shared infrastructure or cross-domain learning.	A programme structure exists with some coordination. Early pilots are underway but initiatives do not yet consistently reinforce each other.	A coherent programme coordinates multiple interconnected initiatives across education, operations, and research. Learning flows between initiatives and feeds back into strategy.
COMMUNICATION	There is no institutional communication about AI. Staff and students have no shared source of information, direction, or narrative.	Communication about AI is ad hoc, announcements rather than dialogue. No consistent narrative or channel strategy.	Regular communication exists through multiple channels. Stakeholders are informed, but communication is mostly broadcast rather than dialogue.	Communication is relational and strategic, creating shared meaning, surfacing tensions productively, and inviting genuine participation. The AI story is co-owned across the institution.
CULTURE CHANGE	AI is absent from the institutional conversation. There are no shared norms, no visible experimentation, and no acknowledgement of the cultural dimension of AI adoption.	AI is experienced as an external imposition or individual choice. No shared norms, rituals, or language around AI.	Some cultural shifts are visible, new language emerging, pockets of experimentation, early rituals. But change is fragile and dependent on specific people or teams.	The beliefs, habits, language, and daily behaviours around AI are woven into the institution's identity, storytelling, and everyday practices.

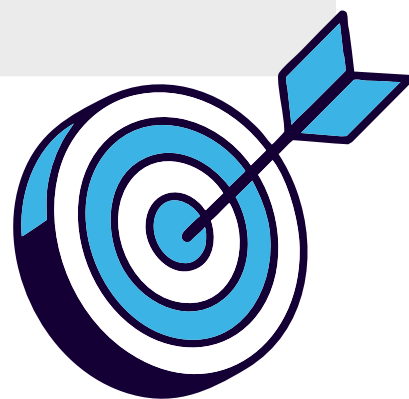
The Orientation Scan is not a scorecard, there is no pass or fail, and no single correct path through the components. Different institutions will have different profiles depending on their size, governance, culture, and history. Once you have mapped where you are, sit with these questions before deciding where to focus:

- Which components show the biggest gap between where you are and where you want to be?
- Which components, if strengthened, would have the most immediate effect on the others?
- Where do you have energy and people ready to move, regardless of where the gap is largest?
- What does your leadership have appetite for right now?

If you are mostly **'Not Present'** across components, you are at the beginning.

That is not a problem, it is a starting point, and it is useful to name it honestly. The most important first step is not to build something but to understand why this matters for your institution specifically.

At BUAs, we learned that you cannot engineer a perfect sequence. You work with what you have, where you have momentum, while keeping the full picture in view.



### 2.3 The one thing you cannot skip: leadership buy-in

Every implementation we observed, and every failure mode we encountered, traced back to one variable more than any other: whether leadership was genuinely on board. This doesn't mean leadership doing all the work. It means leadership providing visible sponsorship, real resources, and the institutional permission that allows others to act.

At BUAs, the Executive Board's early commitment, publicly framing AI not as a threat to manage but as a transformation to lead, made everything else possible. It gave the programme team legitimacy, unlocked budget, and signalled to the entire institution that this was serious. Without that, even the most motivated programme team will hit walls.

A few things that help when building the case for leadership:

#### Frame it as educational mission, not technology adoption

Leaders care about student outcomes, institutional reputation, and their sector's future.

#### Be honest about risk

Not using AI coherently has institutional risks: inconsistent practices, academic integrity confusion, staff falling behind, reputation gaps.

#### Show what's already happening

In most institutions, AI adoption is already underway in pockets. Making those visible shifts the conversation from *'should we?'* to *'we need to do this coherently.'*

#### Ask for a mandate, not just agreement

There is a big difference between *'yes, sounds good'* and a leader publicly sponsoring an institutional AI programme with dedicated resources.

## 2.4 Who needs to be in the room

AI transformation is not a one-person or one-department project. One of the most common failure modes is a small, enthusiastic group working in isolation, building things that don't get adopted because the rest of the institution wasn't part of creating them.

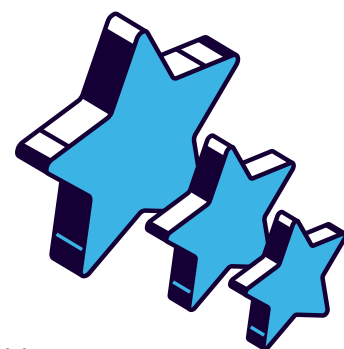
From the start, you need involvement from across the institution. Not everyone deeply, but no major domain should be absent. At minimum, you need voices from teaching and learning, from operations, from IT, and from student representation. Governance and HR need to be aware and engaged early.

This doesn't mean forming a large committee that meets monthly and produces documents. It means building a network of connected people from all levels of the organisation who are part of the conversation, can feed back from their domain, and can act as early communicators in their own circles. That is essentially what the AI Pioneers Team component is designed to formalise.

## 2.5 How to think about sequencing

The six AISC components are not a sequence, they operate simultaneously and reinforce each other. But practically, you cannot do everything at once, and some things genuinely need to come before others.

- **Start with Urgency and Ambition + Strategy, always.** You cannot build a Pioneers Team if people don't know why the work matters. You cannot design a programmatic approach if you have no strategic direction.
- **Build your Pioneers Team early, before you have all the answers.** Bring your pioneers in while things are still being shaped, their early involvement creates ownership that makes later implementation far more effective.
- **Let Communication and Cultural Change run throughout, from day one.** The way you communicate about AI from the very first conversation shapes how people relate to it.
- **Use the Programmatic Approach to create early wins.** Identify two or three concrete initiatives you can complete and make visible within the first six months.



## 2.6 A note on pace and patience

At BUAs, two years of intensive work built what we would call strong organisational readiness, comprehensive infrastructure, clear strategy, trained staff, active pioneer network. And yet even that wasn't enough to guarantee that people were genuinely, deeply engaging with AI. That gap, between organisational readiness and human readiness, is something we only fully understood through the experience of implementation.

We share that not to discourage you, but to set honest expectations. This is long work. The AISC gives you a structure to do it systematically rather than chaotically, but it doesn't make it fast. Plan for years, not months. Celebrate progress, not arrival.



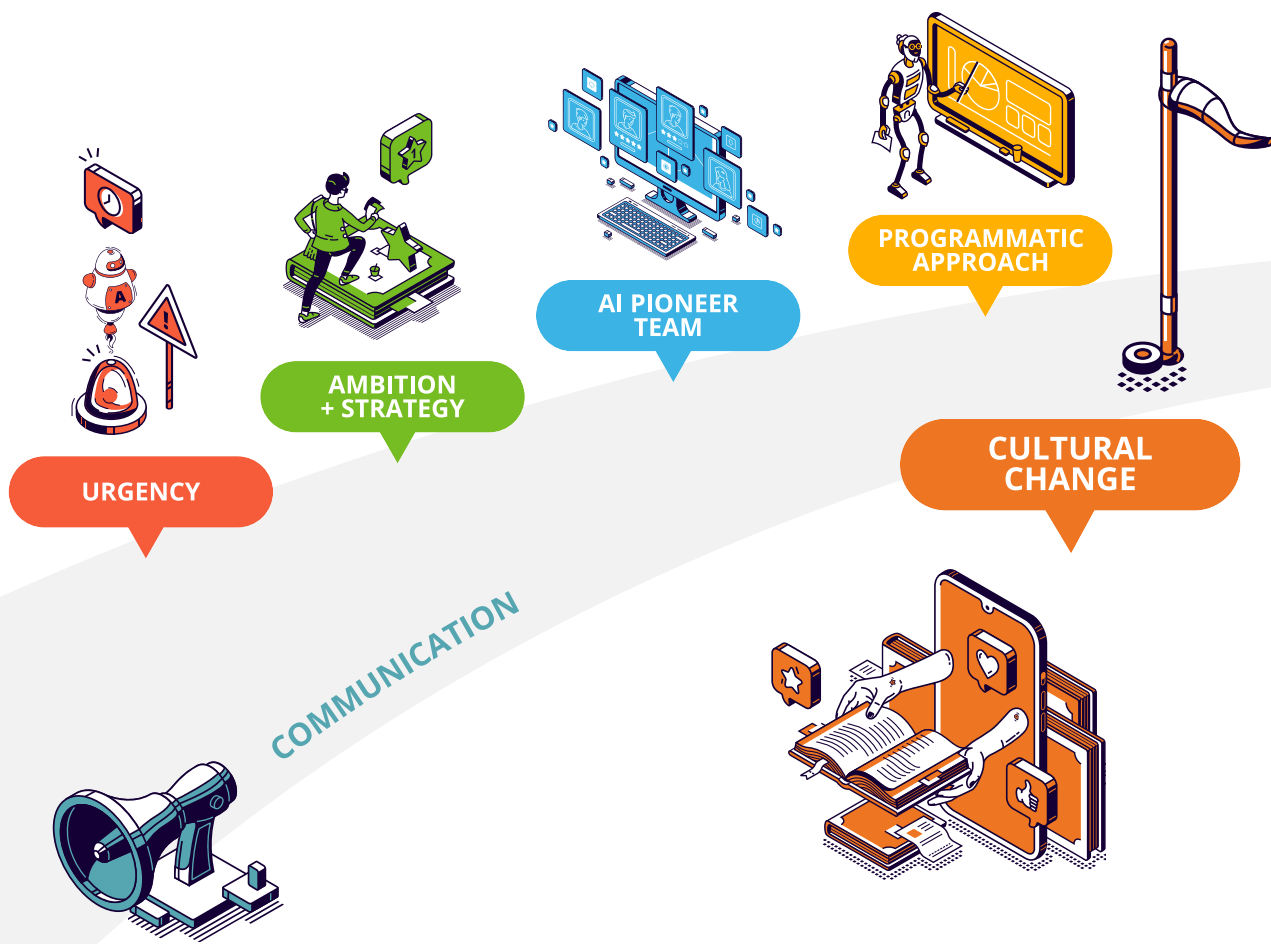
# 3

## COMPONENT BY COMPONENT

Each component is presented in a consistent format: what it is, why it matters, what we did at BUAs, what you can do, and what to watch out for. Read sequentially for the full picture, or jump directly to whichever component is most pressing for your institution right now.



### AI Strategy Compass



URGENCY

AMBITION + STRATEGY

AI PIONEER TEAM

PROGRAMMATIC APPROACH

CULTURAL CHANGE

COMMUNICATION

## Component 1

# URGENCY

### What it is

Urgency in the AISC is not about manufacturing panic. It's about creating shared recognition that AI represents both opportunity and challenge requiring collective response, a collective sense of *'why now?'* that is pedagogically grounded, ethically aware, and strategically aligned.

The goal is to move an institution from *'we should probably do something about AI'* to *'we understand why this matters for us specifically, and we are choosing to act deliberately.'* That shift in orientation changes everything that follows.

### Why it matters

Without urgency, nothing else in the AISC gains traction. Pioneers have no mandate. Strategy discussions remain abstract. Communication falls on deaf ears. People attend one workshop and move on.

The risk of urgency done poorly is equally real. Urgency framed as crisis, 'AI is disrupting everything, we must keep up', triggers anxiety rather than engagement. It produces reactive, fragmented responses rather than deliberate transformation. The task is to build urgency that motivates without overwhelming.

Urgency must also reach all levels of the organisation, not just leadership and coordinators. Genuine shared urgency means that Faculty-level leadership, programme teams, and individual lecturers all understand why this matters for their specific context, not just that an institutional decision has been made at the top.

### What we did at BUAs

From the beginning, BUAs's Executive Board framed AI not as a threat to be contained but as a transformation to be led. This framing was important, but it was the outcome of building urgency, not the start of it. In early 2023, the board publicly committed to making BUAs a frontrunner in leveraging AI as a transformative tool in education, research, and operations. This top-level positioning was essential, it gave permission

for experimentation and allocated resources for systematic implementation.

But leadership messaging alone doesn't create urgency. We built it through multiple channels: open sessions where staff could voice concerns and questions, domain-specific demonstrations showing AI's relevance in specific professional contexts, honest communication about what was already happening in the sector, and deliberate connection of AI to BUAs's own educational values rather than to abstract technological trends.

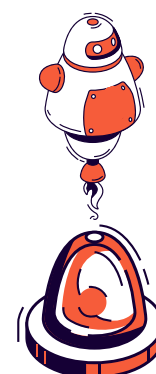
Critically, we framed urgency around opportunity and identity, 'what kind of institution do we want to be?', rather than around fear or compliance. This created a different quality of engagement.

### What you can do

- **Hold open conversations** before launching any programme, give people space to voice what they're already thinking and feeling about AI.
- **Connect Artificial Intelligence** to your institution's own stated values and educational mission, not to generic technological disruption.
- **Make visible what's already happening**, show that AI adoption is underway informally, and that the choice is not whether to engage but how.
- **Involve leadership** in setting tone early, visible, authentic engagement from the top creates permission for others to act.
- **Sustain urgency over time**, it fades. Build regular touchpoints that reconnect people to the why.

### What to watch out for

- Urgency framed as panic creates threat responses, people shut down rather than open up.
- Urgency that isn't connected to people's own professional identity feels imposed, not shared.
- Creating urgency once and assuming it persists, it requires ongoing cultivation.
- Urgency that reaches enthusiasts but not sceptics, the already-convinced don't need convincing.



## Component 2

# AMBITION + STRATEGY



### What it is

Once urgency is established, it must be channelled into meaningful direction. Ambition + Strategy ensures that an institution's response to AI is visionary rather than reactive, articulating not just what you will do but why, and translating that into a coherent roadmap that coordinates action across the institution.

Ambition without strategy remains rhetorical aspiration. Strategy without ambition is just bureaucracy. The AISC integrates both: a compelling vision of what the institution is reaching toward, grounded in a practical structure for getting there.

### Why it matters

Strategy provides the orientation within which everything else operates. Without it, pioneers have no shared direction, communication lacks, alignment and the programmatic approach produces disconnected initiatives rather than cumulative progress.

**Equally important:** Strategy that sits in a document but isn't operationalised is worse than no strategy, because it creates the illusion of direction without the reality. The measure of a good AI strategy is not how well it reads but how it shapes decisions and behaviours at every level of the organisation.

### What we did at BUAs

**BUAs' ambition was articulated clearly:** to be a frontrunner in leveraging AI as a transformative tool in education, research, and operations, while keeping ethical considerations at the forefront. Crucially, this ambition was framed in terms of BUAs's educational mission, developing 'deeply human skills' alongside AI fluency, using AI as 'co-intelligence' rather than replacement.

The AI Programme team developed a four-phase strategic timeline extending to 2030: AI Literacy (2023-2025) building the foundation; AI Adoption (2025-2026) moving from abstract to concrete; AI Incubation (2027-2028) for collaborative innovation; and Applied Recognition (2029-2030)

establishing BUAs as a recognised knowledge hub.

Within this timeline, work was organised across four strategic pillars, Education, Operations, Research, and Ethics & Governance, ensuring AI integration was not siloed. Each pillar had specific objectives, but they were explicitly interconnected: pedagogical approaches developed in Education informed staff training; research findings fed back into pioneer practices; ethics principles shaped all domains.

### What you can do

- **Develop a one-page strategy summary** that is genuinely accessible, if only specialists can read it, it won't drive behaviour.
- **Build a multi-year phased roadmap** with clear intermediate milestones, this manages expectations and enables progress assessment.
- **Organise strategy across domains** (education, operations, research) from the start, AI integration siloed in one department doesn't produce institutional transformation.
- **Make your values explicit in your strategy**, not as a preamble but as a filter for decisions.
- **Ensure the strategy translates into actionable plans** at every level, institution, academy/school/faculty, programme, and course, so that colleagues can find themselves in it and act on it in their own context.
- **Review strategy regularly.** AI is moving fast, and a strategy set once and never revisited quickly becomes irrelevant.

### What to watch out for

- Strategy developed by leadership without involvement of those who will implement it, adoption suffers
- Ambition set too vaguely ('be a leader in AI') without concrete indicators of what that means
- Strategy that addresses education but ignores operations, or vice versa, transformation requires cross-domain coherence
- Phasing that is too aggressive, promising too much too quickly erodes trust when timelines slip.

## Component 3

# AI PIONEER TEAM

### What it is

The AI Pioneers Team is a cross-domain group of staff who serve as change agents, connectors, and capacity builders across the institution. They are not technical specialists deployed to train others. They are trusted colleagues who combine curiosity about AI with deep knowledge of their own professional domain, what the AISC calls 'AI translators.'

Pioneers bridge the gap between institutional strategy and everyday practice. They make abstract policy concrete for the colleagues around them, model experimentation and reflection, surface what's working and what isn't, and create the relational connections through which genuine cultural change spreads.

### Why it matters

Top-down mandates and external consultants can create awareness, but they rarely create transformation. Transformation happens when trusted peers model new practices and make them feel safe and relevant. The Pioneers Team is the mechanism through which AI engagement becomes something that happens in relationships rather than something that happens in workshops.

Pioneers also serve as the institution's feedback loop, they are close enough to practice to see what's actually happening on the ground, and connected enough to leadership to ensure those signals reach decision-making.

### What we did at BUAs

BUAs established a Pioneers Team with one representative from every academy. Critically, each pioneer was allocated one protected day per week, negotiated over six months, dedicated to pioneer work. This wasn't just a practical decision; it was a powerful institutional signal that this kind of work has value.

Pioneer Mondays became a weekly institutional rhythm, a standing meeting combining capacity building, peer exchange, strategic coordination, and community. The team met as a group, learned together, and then dispersed into their academies to apply and adapt.

Over time we also learned that pioneers need support as much as they give it. Without attention

to their own readiness, their sense of mandate, their connection to each other, their capacity to handle the complexity of their role, even skilled pioneers can experience isolation and burnout.

Pioneers are positioned within their academy through two structural mechanisms. Monthly meetings bring together the AI Programme Team, the pioneer, the academy director, an educational developer, and academy management, creating a regular touchpoint where institutional direction, academy context, and programme reality meet. Between these meetings, pioneers have dedicated time allocated within their academy to work directly with colleagues on course redesign, assessment, and AI integration.

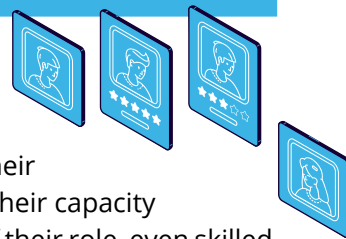
Pioneers are a recognised distributed leadership network with clear roles, protected capacity, and strong relational connections across all domains.

### What you can do

- **Select pioneers for relational capital as well as expertise**, the most effective pioneers are trusted by peers, not just technically capable
- **Negotiate protected time** from the start, without it, pioneer work gets crowded out by day-to-day demands
- **Create a pioneer identity** with its own rituals, this makes the role visible and builds the team's cohesion
- **Give pioneers influence over the programme**, they should be co-designers, not only implement
- **Invest in pioneer wellbeing**, check in on their sense of impact, their relationships with colleagues, and their own learning
- **Create structural connections** between pioneers and academy leadership, formal meeting rhythms ensure the pioneer role is embedded, not peripheral

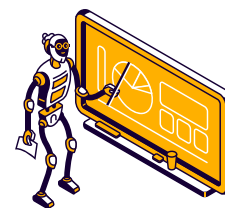
### What to watch out for

- Selecting pioneers based on enthusiasm alone, they also need credibility with sceptical colleagues
- Pioneers without protected time becoming overwhelmed and disengaged
- Pioneers working in isolation without regular connection to each other, the peer network is as important as their individual work
- Assuming pioneers will indefinitely sustain motivation without recognition and genuine institutional support



## Component 4

# PROGRAMMATIC APPROACH



### What it is

The Programmatic Approach is what transforms a collection of AI-related activities into a unified institutional effort.

Rather than running isolated pilots dependent on individual champions, a programme provides shared infrastructure, coordinated governance, and the conditions for cross-domain learning.

A programme is not a master plan that specifies everything in advance. It is a structure within which experimentation and adaptation can happen in a coordinated way, so that learning in one part of the institution can inform and benefit the whole.

### Why it matters

Isolated projects don't create systemic change. They remain local, fragile, and dependent on specific people. When those people leave or lose energy, the initiative collapses. A programme creates institutional capacity that persists beyond individuals.

The programmatic approach is also where strategy becomes operational. It translates high-level ambition into concrete projects with owners, timelines, and accountability, while maintaining enough flexibility to adapt as the institution learns.

### What we did at BUAs

BUAs's AI Programme operated through five interconnected teams: a Central Programme Team for strategic coordination and Executive Board alignment; an AI Pioneers Team for hands-on implementation in academies; an AI Training Team for professional development; an Operations Team for decentralised project-based facilitation; and a Research & Innovation Team for applied research and publications.

Across academies, coordination happens through an annual full-day planning session at the start of each academic year. The AI Programme Team and all pioneers come together to co-construct a shared timeline for the year, mapping initiatives, identifying dependencies, and agreeing priorities across programmes. This ensures that what happens in one academy can inform and connect with what is happening in others, rather than each academy working in isolation.

The power of this structure wasn't in any single initiative, it was in how initiatives reinforced each other. Pedagogical approaches developed in Education informed staff training. Research findings fed back into pioneer practices. Ethics principles shaped both. Human Readiness insights informed training design and assessment approaches.

We also established an AI Experiments programme, offering small grants for innovation projects across education and operations. This created a structured way to encourage experimentation while maintaining institutional connection, pilots were framed as learning instruments feeding back into the broader programme.

### What you can do

- **Start with a small number of well-resourced initiatives** rather than many underfunded ones, depth of execution matters more than breadth of coverage.
- **Build explicit cross-domain connections**, don't let education, operations, and research develop separate AI approaches that don't talk to each other.
- **Create regular learning moments**, structured opportunities to reflect on what's working and feed insights back into the programme.
- **Document as you go**, or the implementation knowledge will get easily lost; capturing it is part of building institutional capacity.
- **Use early projects to generate visible wins** that build momentum and demonstrate seriousness.

### What to watch out for

- Building programme infrastructure before having leadership mandate, structure without authority doesn't hold.
- Too many initiatives too early, spreading resources too thin and preventing depth of execution.
- Programme governance that is so tight it stifles adaptation, the programme should enable, not control.
- Failing to connect the programme to institutional planning cycles, initiatives not embedded in budget and strategy processes remain peripheral.

## Component 5

# COMMUNICATION

### What it is

In the AISC, communication is not about broadcast messaging. It is about creating conditions for shared meaning-making. The question is not 'how do we inform people about AI?' but 'how do we create conversations that invite genuine engagement, surface concerns, and build collective understanding?'

Communication in this sense is relational, it is what connects the institution to itself around AI. Done well, it builds trust, reduces fear, and creates the sense that AI transformation is something happening with people rather than to them.

### Why it matters

Even the best-designed programme fails if people don't understand what it's trying to do and why. But more than information, people need to feel heard. Transformation asks people to change how they work, think, and relate to their practice, that is a significant ask, and it deserves genuine dialogue, not just clear messaging.

Communication also manages the pace of change. In a fast-moving field like AI, the institution that communicates honestly about uncertainty, rather than projecting false confidence, builds more durable trust than one that presents AI as fully understood and managed.

### What we did at BUAs

BUAs built communication infrastructure across multiple channels: executive messaging positioning AI in institutional strategy; regular blog posts and articles sharing progress, experiments, and honest reflection; workshop series creating space for hands-on engagement; internal dialogue platforms for questions and concerns; and pioneer-led storytelling showing AI applications in authentic domain contexts.

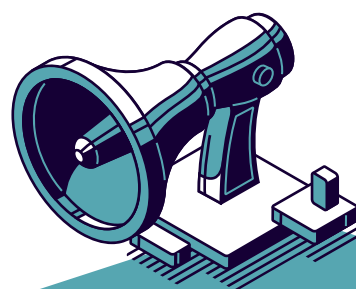
Our communication approach followed several principles: normalise uncertainty rather than project false certainty; surface tensions and make space for disagreement; celebrate genuine attempts as well as successes; connect every

initiative to BUAs's educational values; and position stakeholders as active contributors rather than passive recipients.

What didn't work: information overload across too many channels; selective engagement where the same people participated repeatedly while others remained disengaged; translation gaps where abstract concepts remained difficult to operationalise; and timing mismatches where communication followed programme logic rather than faculty attention cycles.

The key lesson: communication alone cannot drive transformation. It is necessary but insufficient. Even excellent communication fails when psychological, cognitive, or relational readiness is absent in the audience.

Feedback channels need to be formalised, visible, and, critically, acted on. Communication that flows only outward produces awareness without trust. At BUAs, we built multiple low-threshold channels for colleagues to bring questions, concerns, and ideas: weekly AI booths at lunchtime where anyone could walk up with a question; a dedicated physical workspace where colleagues know they can find the AI Programme Team; a Teams channel and email address for asynchronous contact; and training sessions designed as dialogue rather than broadcast. The SPARK sessions, peer-led interactive workshops where faculty explored AI tools and pedagogical approaches hands-on, were a particularly effective format for genuine exchange. The diversity of channels matters, different people need different entry points. What matters equally is that what comes through those channels visibly shapes decisions. If colleagues see their input acknowledged and acted on, the channels build trust. If they don't, the channels become noise.



### What you can do

- **Develop a consistent narrative**, a clear story about what you're doing, why, and what it means for different groups, and return to it regularly.
- **Design for dialogue**, not broadcast, create channels where people can genuinely respond, question, and contribute.
- **Vary formats and channels to reach different audiences**, written updates reach some people, workshops reach others, peer conversations reach others still.
- **Name tensions openly**, acknowledging that AI raises real questions about professional identity, ethics, and the future of education builds more trust than pretending these questions don't exist.
- **Communicate about failures and learning**, not just successes, this models the experimental culture you're trying to build.
- **Formalise feedback mechanisms** and make visible how they shape decisions, listening without acting undermines trust.

### What to watch out for

- Communicating about AI as primarily a technical matter, people engage when they understand the human implications.
- Creating so many communication channels that the core message gets lost.
- Measuring communication by reach rather than engagement, having people receive a message is not the same as having them understand or act on it.
- Stopping communication during quiet periods, sustained presence matters even when there isn't major news to share.



## Component 6

# CULTURAL CHANGE

### What it is

Cultural change is the deepest and most difficult dimension of AI implementation. Culture is the unwritten rules, shared beliefs, and collective practices that shape 'how we do things here.' Changing it means shifting these deep patterns, not through mandate, but through experience, dialogue, and gradual norm evolution. For AI adoption, cultural change means normalising [15.1] experimentation, embracing learning-in-public, surfacing ethical dilemmas as part of professional practice, and developing new collaborative habits.

Cultural change is also where the deepest resistance lives. And that resistance is worth taking seriously, it often reflects genuine values, legitimate concerns, and real questions about professional identity and institutional direction that deserve engagement rather than management.

The deepest and most demanding dimension of cultural change is one that is easy to overlook: the willingness to fundamentally change pedagogy. Adopting AI tools is relatively straightforward. Rethinking what learning means in an AI-present world, questioning assessment assumptions, redesigning the relationship between student and teacher, reconsidering what professional formation requires, is something else entirely. It asks people to examine practices they have often spent years developing and to hold them open to fundamental revision. Not every colleague is ready for that, and no amount of training or tool access will manufacture that readiness. Creating the conditions for genuine pedagogical transformation is the hardest work of cultural change, and it is work that institutions are only beginning to understand.

## What we did at BUAs

At BUAs, cultural change was pursued through connection rather than mandate. Pioneer Mondays created a weekly community of practice. SPARK sessions, peer-led interactive workshops where faculty explored AI tools and pedagogical approaches hands-on, were designed around peer exchange rather than expert instruction. We deliberately created safe spaces for vulnerability, normalising struggle, mistakes, and learning-in-progress.

We created new rituals and symbols: Pioneer Mondays as institutional rhythm; SPARK as a recognised approach for peer-led learning; presence at every BUAs Day and academic year opening where leadership would consistently name AI as part of the institution's identity; and the visual AI Strategy Compass becoming a recognisable institutional symbol.

We encountered and worked with resistance rather than around it: philosophical resistance from faculty questioning whether AI aligns with humanistic education values; practical resistance about workload and capacity; identity resistance from educators fearing AI threatens their professional expertise. Following relational feedback theory, we treated resistance not as obstacle but as signal, indicating what matters to people, what they fear losing, what values feel threatened.

By late 2025, we observed that culture hadn't shifted as deeply as infrastructure had developed. The 'false familiarity' phenomenon, people claiming AI was normalised while avoiding deeper engagement, indicated surface adoption without deep transformation. This gap became the catalyst for recognising Human Readiness as a distinct dimension requiring specific attention.

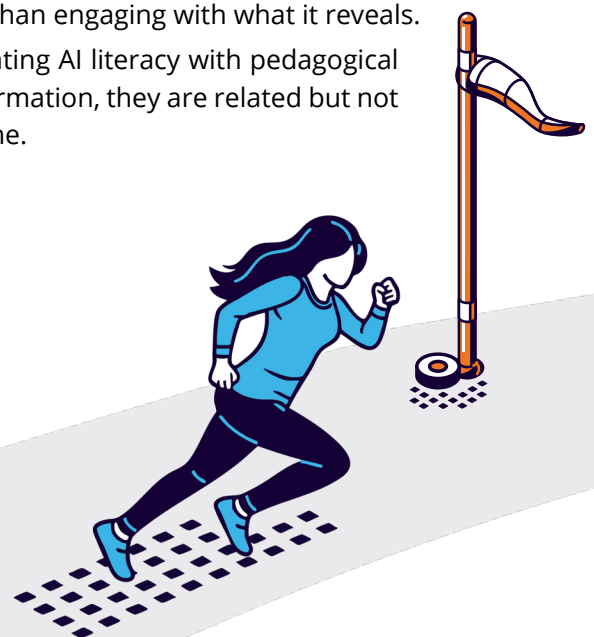
## What you can do

- **Name the cultural change** you are seeking explicitly, people need to understand what is being asked of them, not just what tools they are expected to use.

- **Create rituals** and recurring moments that make new norms visible and celebrated, culture shifts through repetition and symbol as much as through policy.
- **Work with resistance** rather than around it, take seriously what people are concerned about and build those concerns into how you design and adapt the programme.
- **Model the culture you want** at leadership level, if leaders don't publicly experiment, reflect, and admit uncertainty about AI, it's much harder for others to do so.
- **Be patient**, cultural change operates on a slower timescale than infrastructure development, and cannot be accelerated by urgency alone.
- **Create specific space** for pedagogical reflection, not just AI tool adoption but genuine questioning of teaching assumptions and practices.

## What to watch out for

- Treating cultural change as a communication problem, it is a relational and experiential problem.
- Expecting culture to shift because systems and processes have been put in place.
- Interpreting surface compliance (people saying AI is fine, people completing training) as genuine cultural shift.
- Attempting to manage or neutralise resistance rather than engaging with what it reveals.
- Conflating AI literacy with pedagogical transformation, they are related but not the same.



## WHAT WE LEARNED

### 4.1 What worked and why

Looking back across three years of implementation, several things stand out as genuinely effective, not just in producing outputs, but in creating durable institutional capacity.



#### The AISC provided coherence.

Having a shared approach that all teams could reference, the six components, the compass metaphor, the visual, meant that conversations across the institution had a common language. That coherence prevented fragmentation.

#### Peer leadership outperformed top-down mandate.

The AI Pioneers Team, with their relational capital and domain knowledge, created engagement that external trainers and institutional directives could not. Trusted peers modelling curiosity and experimentation changed the atmosphere.



#### Protected time was significant.

Negotiating this one day per week for pioneers sent a powerful signal.

#### Honest communication built trust.

Acknowledging uncertainty, naming tensions, and communicating about failures as well as successes created a quality of institutional trust that polished messaging would not have.

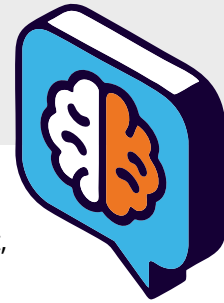
#### Starting with values rather than tools set the right orientation.

Framing AI in terms of educational mission and human development, rather than technological capability, shaped how the whole institution related to the transformation.



### 4.2 What we would do differently

Equally important are the things we would approach differently with the benefit of hindsight.



#### **Involve more people earlier in strategy development.**

The strategy was developed thoughtfully, but more co-creation from the start, particularly from sceptical voices, would have built broader ownership.

#### **Invest in pioneer support structures sooner.**

We recognised pioneer isolation as a problem later than we should have. Building peer support and wellbeing into the pioneer programme from the outset would have helped.

#### **Create lower-stakes entry points earlier.**

Some of our most effective engagement happened in informal, low-pressure settings. We would build more of those into the programme from the beginning.

#### **Attend to the gap between strategy and lived experience more explicitly.**

Leadership understood the strategy; colleagues experienced implementation. Bridging that gap required more deliberate effort than we initially allocated.

The translation from institutional strategy to academy (school/faculty) and programme level took longer than some colleagues felt comfortable with. In retrospect, we would not have done the sequencing differently, Phase 2 required the foundation that Phase 1 built, and attempting both simultaneously would have produced neither well. What we would do differently is name the phasing more explicitly and earlier, so that colleagues understood that their moment was coming, that the institutional work was preparation for their work, not a replacement of it. The frustration some experienced was partly a communication gap, not a structural one.

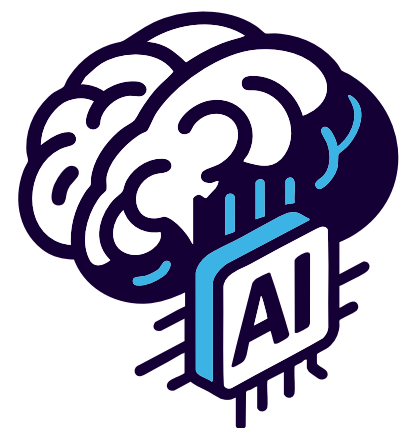
### 4.3 The gap we discovered: organisational readiness versus human readiness

The most significant insight from BUAs's implementation was one we didn't set out to find.

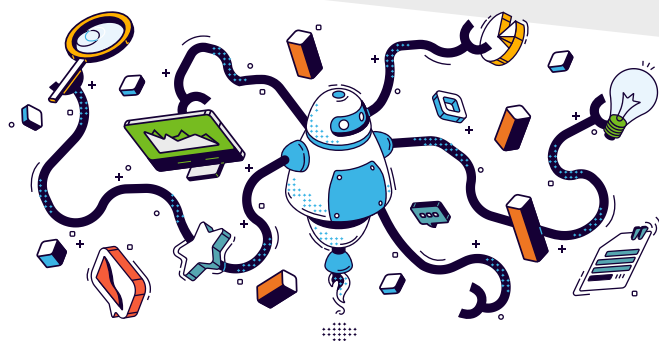
By traditional organisational readiness metrics, BUAs had achieved something substantial by 2025: comprehensive infrastructure spanning all six AISC components, institution-wide access to AI tools, tiered training programmes, an active pioneers network, and visible leadership commitment. Everything was in place.

And yet we observed persistent patterns that didn't fit a narrative of successful transformation: workshop attendance remaining sparse despite quality content; colleagues claiming '*AI is so normal now*' while avoiding deeper engagement; even pioneers sometimes reporting feelings of isolation and unclear impact; and widespread surface adoption coexisting with limited deep transformation.

These patterns pointed toward a gap we had not anticipated, and one we are still in the process of understanding. Further research into what we are calling Human Readiness is currently underway.



# ADAPTING TO YOUR CONTEXT



## 5.1 The AISC is a compass, not a template

Everything in this guide emerged from one institution's experience. BUAs is a specific kind of university, with a specific culture, governance structure, size, and starting point. Your institution is different. The AISC gives you an approach to implement fully, not a menu to pick from. All six components are required. What differs across institutions is how each component takes shape, the scale, the pace, the specific people and structures involved.

Smaller institutions sometimes assume that frontrunner status in AI requires scale, large research budgets, major infrastructure, institutional weight. The BUAs experience suggests otherwise. The change the AISC pursues is not primarily a matter of resources; it is a matter of conviction, coherence, and the capacity to bring people along. Those are advantages a focused, cohesive institution can have over a larger, more fragmented one. If the transformation you are seeking is human rather than technical, then size is not the determining factor, clarity of purpose is.

Adaptation is not a compromise. It is what responsible implementation looks like. The question for every component is not 'how did BUAs do this?' but 'what does this component require, given our specific context, constraints, and strengths?'

## 5.2 Different starting points

The Orientation Scan in Part 2 helps you understand where you are. Here are some considerations depending on your starting position.

### If you are mostly Activity-oriented across components

Your most urgent work is building the basic conditions: leadership mandate, a clearer shared sense of why this matters, and identifying two or three people who can anchor the early effort.

Don't try to build everything at once. Pick the component where you have the most existing energy and start there, but hold the full picture in mind so you don't build in isolation.

### If you are mostly Process-oriented across components

You have structure but not yet coherence. The risk at this stage is that initiatives are happening but not reinforcing each other, and that compliance is mistaken for genuine engagement.

Focus on deepening rather than broadening. Fewer, better-connected initiatives. More investment in relational work. More honest assessment of where surface adoption is masking limited transformation.

## If you are mostly Sustainable across components

Strong foundations are in place. The next challenge is the translation from institutional infrastructure to academy, programme, and course level, ensuring that what has been built centrally is genuinely reinterpreted in local contexts.

This is also where Human Readiness becomes most visible as a challenge. Surface adoption can coexist with limited deep transformation. The question shifts from 'do we have the structures?' to 'are people genuinely engaging and willing to transform their practice?'

## If you are mixed, strong in some components, weak in others

This is the most common profile. Identify the weakest components and ask whether they are creating bottlenecks for the stronger ones.

A strong Programmatic Approach without Cultural Change will produce activity without transformation. Strong Communication without Urgency will produce awareness without motivation. The components work together, gaps matter.



### 5.3 Questions to guide your adaptation

Whatever your starting point, these questions will help you think through how to apply the AISC to your specific situation.

- Whatever your starting point, these questions will help you think through how to apply the AISC to your specific situation.
- What is the dominant culture of our institution, risk-averse or experimental, hierarchical or distributed, compliance-oriented or values-driven? How does that shape where we start?
- What governance structures do we have, and how do they help or hinder cross-domain coordination?
- Who are the natural connectors and trusted voices in our institution, regardless of their formal role?
- What has been tried before, and what can we learn from those attempts, even if they didn't work?
- What is the minimum viable structure we need to start moving, given our current resources?
- What would success look like in two years, not in terms of outputs, but in terms of how people relate to AI in their work?



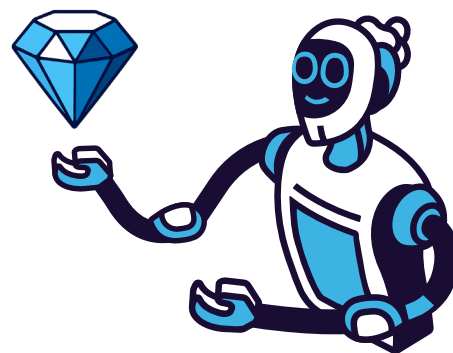
### 5.4 A final word

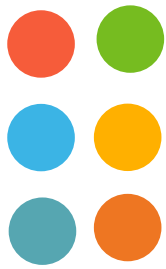
Implementing AI in a university is not a technical project. It is a human endeavour, one that asks people to change how they work, think, and relate to their practice, in the context of a technology that is moving faster than any institution can fully keep up with.

The AISC gives you a structure for navigating that complexity. It won't make the work easy. It will make it more clear, more deliberate, and more likely to produce durable transformation rather than impressive activity.

What BUAs learned, above all, is that real change happens not only through strategy and structure, but through connection, trust, and shared purpose. The work of implementing AI is also the work of cultivating new ways of relating, to technology, to each other, and to the future of learning.

**That, ultimately, is what gives this work meaning.**





# AI Strategy Compass



## Afterword: What comes next

On 17 September 2025, sitting in a conference room in Oxford, I heard something that reframed eighteen months of puzzling patterns.

*“AI literacy is not the same as human readiness.”*

We had built something real at BUAs. The infrastructure is in place. The pioneers are embedded. The Vision on Teaching and Learning with AI gives every academy a concrete structure to work with. And yet something isn't fully translating. Workshops with sparse attendance, colleagues claiming AI felt normal while avoiding deeper engagement, pioneers doing everything asked of them but not always feeling impactful.

Part of what isn't translating is pedagogical. Colleagues can have access to tools, training, and institutional support, and still not be ready to question the assumptions underneath their practice. Using AI in a course is not the same as rethinking what learning means in an AI-present world. That deeper willingness, to examine pedagogy at its foundations, to hold open practices built over years, cannot be manufactured through structure alone. It requires something we are still learning to name and support.

That sentence from Oxford named what I had been observing. Closing that distance, between structural readiness and real transformation, between AI literacy and human readiness, is the work that comes next.

That is where my research is headed. And if you implement the AISC carefully and find yourself standing in a similar place, with strong foundations and a new question about what it actually takes for people to change, know that you are not failing. You are discovering something real.

*“What we practise with AI today becomes who we are tomorrow.”*

Mel Sellick, 2025



**Ines Springael**

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2026

# FURTHER READING AND SOURCES



This guide is written as a practitioner document and does not use in-text citations. The following works are those the guide directly draws on, conceptually or by explicit reference. For the full theoretical grounding of the AI Strategy Compass framework, see Springael (2025a). For the empirical research on Human Readiness, see Springael (2025b).

## Author's own work

- Springael, I. (2025a). *AISC – AI Strategy Compass: A strategic change approach for comprehensive AI implementation in higher education* [Manuscript submitted for publication]. This is the academic paper underpinning the framework presented in this guide. It provides the full theoretical grounding, literature review, and alignment with change management models.
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- Sellick, M. (2026). *AI literacy ≠ human readiness: A framework for psychological, cognitive, and relational capacity in the age of intelligent systems* [White paper]. Future Human Lab. <https://www.futurehumanlab.com/whitepaper> - The formalised Human Readiness Framework, operationalising readiness across three dimensions: psychological, cognitive, and relational.



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