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The

AI Strategy Compass 

A framework for comprehensive AI implementation in higher education

Breda University of Applied Sciences

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Executive summary

The rapid evolution of artificial intelligence has created an inflection point for higher education institutions worldwide. While generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, Claude and Copilot have redefined approaches to teaching, research, and institutional operations, most universities continue to address these changes through fragmented pilot projects or departmental initiatives. This white paper presents the AI Strategy Compass (AISC), a six-component framework developed at Breda University of Applied Sciences (BUas) to guide institution-wide implementation of artificial intelligence. The framework comprises six interconnected components: Urgency, Ambition + Strategy, AI Pioneer Team, Programmatic Approach, Communication, and Cultural Change. By integrating both technical implementation and cultural transformation, the AISC offers educational leaders a theoretically grounded yet practical roadmap for managing comprehensive AI adoption that rise above isolated initiatives and siloed approaches.

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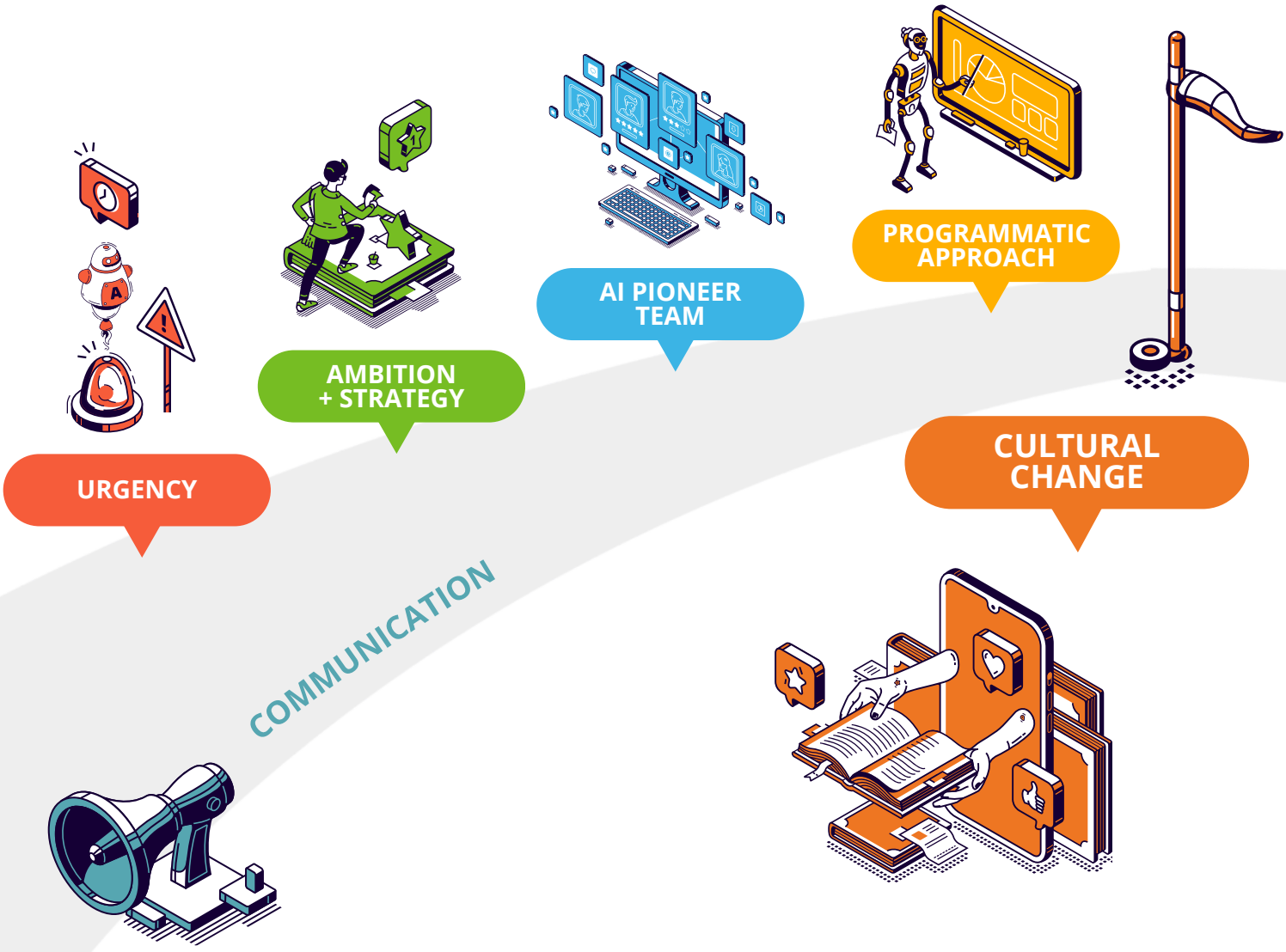
Introduction

The emergence of artificial intelligence represents a profound disruption to higher education, with implications that extend far beyond technological infrastructure. This acceleration has outpaced traditional governance and strategy cycles, leading many institutions to adopt fragmented, reactive measures. Despite growing awareness of AI's potential, comprehensive strategic responses remain rare.

Breda University of Applied Sciences offers a notable case: an institution-wide implementation strategy that explicitly frames AI not as a technical intervention, but as a catalyst for organisational learning and cultural renewal. Importantly, the BUas approach did not start with a finished model. Instead, it emerged from iterative cycles of experimentation, reflection, and cross-functional collaboration. The result was the AI Strategy Compass: a six-part framework developed not just to coordinate AI implementation, but to navigate the deeper behavioural, relational, and structural shifts such a transition demands.

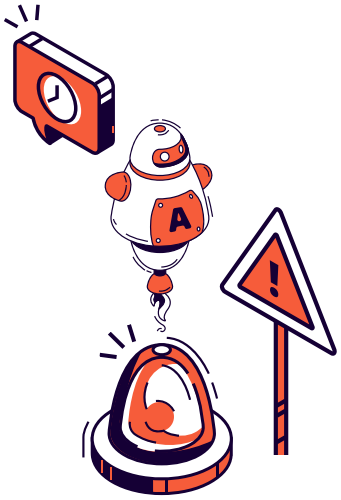
The six components of the

AI Strategy Compass



Urgency

Establishing collective awareness



Creating shared urgency is a foundational starting point for any transformation. At BUas, urgency was not only driven by the rapid evolution of generative AI tools but also by the realisation that fragmented pilot projects risked reinforcing inequalities or missing the strategic potential of AI. The AISC emphasises the need to cultivate a collective sense of urgency that is pedagogically grounded, ethically aware, and strategically aligned. This goes beyond technocratic crisis framing urgency here is not panic, but engaged awareness.

The risk of institutional inaction cannot be understated. Many institutions that fail to tackle this technological shift comprehensively may find themselves facing significantly larger challenges in the medium term, as the gap between AI-enabled and traditional educational approaches widens, potentially affecting competitiveness, student outcomes, and institutional relevance.

The framework begins with creating a shared understanding of why AI implementation is critical for the institution. This involves articulating external pressures (industry demands, technological trends), identifying internal opportunities (enhanced learning experiences, operational efficiencies), and framing AI adoption as both a necessity and an opportunity. The goal was to unify stakeholders not through fear, but through a shared sense of purpose, relevance, and opportunity.

Ambition + Strategy

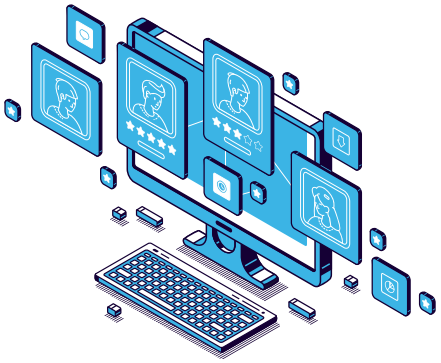
Channelling vision into direction

Once urgency is established, it must be channeled into a meaningful direction. The compass integrates ambition and strategy to ensure that the institution's response to AI is not reactive but visionary. At BUas, ambition was rooted in the desire to leverage AI to strengthen human-centered education and operational excellence. This ambition was translated into an institution-wide AI strategy, aligning innovation goals with core values, quality standards, and long-term institutional development.

Strategic ambition must remain coherent across time frames. A short-term focus on innovation pilots should be linked to a longer-term vision for institutional renewal. The AISC encourages institutions to frame AI not merely as a compliance issue or budget line item, but as an evolving capability that touches pedagogy, research culture, and administrative infrastructure alike.

AI Pioneer Team

Distributed leadership for innovation



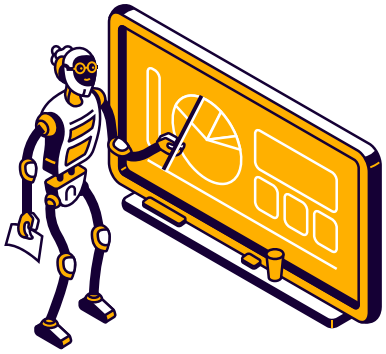
Strategic change requires both leadership and distributed ownership. The AI Pioneer Team at BUas functions as a cross-domain coalition of early adopters and advocates. These pioneers model curiosity, ethical awareness, and collaborative learning. Their role is not to "implement AI" for others, but to co-create practices, act as connectors, and surface needs across the organisation. The team also acts as a feedback loop between the programme manager, university staff, and institutional leadership.

The success of this component lies in selecting and supporting individuals who are not only tech-savvy, but also socially attuned and pedagogically grounded. Pioneers must be trusted by their peers, capable of sparking enthusiasm without imposing solutions. Their effectiveness depends not on formal authority but on relational capital making.

A critical challenge at this stage involves navigating procedural delays that often stem from broader organisational hierarchies. Pioneers must be empowered to work around traditional bureaucratic constraints while maintaining institutional alignment. Quick turnovers and rapid decision-making processes become essential to maintain momentum and demonstrate the transformative potential of AI initiatives.

Programmatic Approach

Translating vision into action

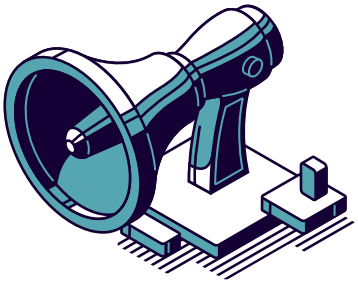


Rather than relying on isolated initiatives, AISC encourages a programmatic approach that integrates various AI-related projects and initiatives into a coherent strategy. This includes projects in education (e.g., curriculum redesign), research (e.g., ethical guidelines), and operations (e.g., AI in administration). A programmatic structure ensures alignment across levels and fosters mutual reinforcement, while also allowing room for experimentation and iteration.

This approach reflects the principle that strategic ambitions must be translated into actionable activities. AISC uses programming as a connective layer between institutional vision and day-to-day practice. It creates a rhythm in which experimentation is not incidental but embedded: short-term pilots are framed as learning instruments that feed back into system-wide adaptation.

Communication

Strategic dialogue and sensemaking



Communication is not just about dissemination it is a relational process that builds trust, alignment, and engagement. In the AISC, communication is framed as strategic storytelling: how do we talk about AI in ways that invite participation, make values explicit, and reduce fear or resistance? At BUas, this meant offering AI training courses for all staff, open sessions, publishing reflections, and emphasising that uncertainty and disagreement are natural in transformative processes.

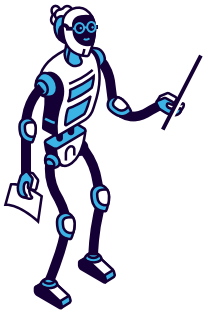
Effective communication in transformative contexts goes beyond informing it invites sensemaking. Strategic storytelling enables stakeholders to position themselves within the change narrative. Communication provides language to name tensions, raise questions, and imagine alternative futures. It becomes not just functional, but symbolic a process through which culture is enacted and renegotiated.

Cultural Change

Embedding transformation

Ultimately, AISC recognises that implementing AI is not only a technical or structural change it is cultural. This requires addressing assumptions, rituals, routines, and power dynamics. Cultural change is fostered through relational practices: facilitating dialogue, celebrating moments of progress, and naming tensions. At BUas, space is made for friction and learning, rather than pushing for linear uptake. Change becomes sustainable when it is embedded in how people work, relate, and make meaning together.

Rather than presenting cultural change as a top-down transformation, the AISC embraces a co-creative and iterative perspective. The framework acknowledges friction and resistance as valuable expressions of what matters to people. These tensions are not obstacles, but opportunities to explore the deeper values, loyalties, and concerns within an organisation. In doing so, cultural change becomes a collective process of meaning-making, grounded in dialogue and mutual recognition.



Design principles and theoretical foundation

The development and initial implementation of the AISC at BUas reflects several key design principles that guided the framework's creation. First, the framework was deliberately designed to approach AI implementation as a change in human behaviour rather than a technical rollout. This human-centric philosophy, which views AI adoption through the lens of behavioural change rather than technical-rational concepts, informed all aspects of the framework's development.

Second, the framework incorporates distributed leadership as a core principle. Recognising that traditional hierarchies may not align with AI expertise distribution, the AISC was designed to empower those with relevant knowledge to lead, with senior management playing a supporting role. This approach aims to leverage on-the-ground expertise and foster broader organisational buy-in.
Third, the programmatic approach represents a deliberate addition that distinguishes the AISC from other existing models. This component was designed to enable institutions to pursue early wins while maintaining coherence with long-term vision, though its effectiveness in practice remains to be systematically evaluated.

While the framework shows alignment with established change management principles, it emerged organically from the specific challenges and opportunities of AI adoption in educational contexts. These design principles shaped the framework's development through iterative cycles of implementation and reflection, though comprehensive assessment of their impact awaits formal evaluation as implementation continues.

Measuring transformation beyond technical metrics

The AISC framework proposes moving beyond traditional metrics that focus solely on tool adoption or infrastructure development. Instead, it emphasises behavioural indicators of meaningful transformation. These include the emergence of cross-departmental collaboration on AI initiatives, grassroots experimentation arising organically from within the institution, new discourse around AI ethics and pedagogy, the development of informal learning rituals such as AI cafés or spark sessions, and increased exploratory and experimental mindset in both teaching and operational contexts.

These behavioural shifts serve as more meaningful indicators of strategic transformation than purely technical metrics. They reflect not only what is changing within the institution, but how those changes are experienced and internalised by stakeholders.

Future directions and ongoing research

While the AISC offers a useful framework, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the framework emerged from a medium-sized, single-campus university of applied sciences in the Netherlands. Its design was shaped by the specific governance structures, cultural dynamics, and resource constraints of that context. As such, its applicability to larger, multi-campus institutions or to universities operating under different national systems requires further investigation.

Second, while the AISC was built through extensive practitioner reflection and iterative experimentation, systematic evaluation of its outcomes is now being developed. The AISC Maturity Scan, a reflective assessment tool grounded in participatory research methods and developmental quality models, is currently being implemented to measure institutional progress across the framework's six dimensions. This tool will enable formal assessment of how the framework affects educational quality, learning outcomes, institutional performance, and cultural transformation.

Conclusion

The AI Strategy Compass offers a theoretically grounded yet practical approach for guiding institution-wide AI implementation in higher education. By systematically addressing both the procedural and human dimensions of change, this framework provides a pathway for universities to move beyond fragmented experiments toward comprehensive and strategic AI implementation.

What makes AISC particularly distinctive is its integration of two often separate domains: cultural transformation and programmatic implementation. Its six interconnected components work in concert to create the psychological safety, strategic direction, and operational coherence needed to support sustainable transformation.

For me, as both researcher and practitioner, developing and reflecting on the AISC framework has reinforced a core belief: 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.

This white paper presents preliminary insights from the implementation of the AI Strategy Compass at Breda University of Applied Sciences, based on research recognised at the UNESCO Global Forum on Ethics and AI in Education (2025). Full theoretical analysis and comprehensive findings will be published in forthcoming academic publications.

About this White Paper

This framework emerged from lived experiences implementing AI transformation at BUas, combined with extensive literature review spanning organisational change theory, behavioural psychology, and educational innovation. The author is currently expanding this research through the development of the AISC Maturity Scan matrix and comprehensive participatory research methodology for the coming academic year.

Reference:
Springael, I. (2025). *AI Strategy Compass.* Presentation at the Global Forum on Ethics and AI in Education (UNESCO)

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For more information about the AI Strategy Compass or to discuss implementation at your institution, please reach out via email.

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