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The changing face of higher education: Evolving roles of learners and educators

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Introduction

Higher education systems globally are entering a period of structural change. Long-standing assumptions about how learning is delivered, who participates in it and what outcomes matter are being re-examined as economies, technologies and career pathways evolve.

In the previous edition of this series, we explored how learning itself is being reshaped. Rapid changes in skill requirements, industry expectations and employability pressures are prompting institutions to rethink what they teach and how quickly curricula can adapt to new work environments.

The shift in learning is also redefining the roles of people at the centre of education. As knowledge becomes more dynamic and career pathways less predictable, the traditional roles of students and educators are also changing. Learners are becoming more self-directed, participatory and outcome-focused, while educators are moving beyond conventional teaching roles towards facilitation, mentorship and shaping learning design.

The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is further accelerating these shifts. With AI tools supporting knowledge discovery, problem-solving and content generation, higher education is placing greater emphasis on critical thinking, contextual understanding and guided intellectual exploration. This transformation is reshaping expectations from both learners and educators.[1] These changes can be seen on a global scale. Together, they signal a broader transformation in how individuals engage with modern education and how institutions support their learning.

Six structural shifts are redefining the expectations placed on both learners and educators.

[1] UNESCO. Guidance for Generative Artificial Intelligence in Education and Research. 2023

Six structural forces at work

1 Learners are becoming self-directed and prioritise continuous upskilling

The traditional model of completing education once and relying on that qualification throughout the career is no longer feasible. Rapid technological change and evolving job roles require individuals to continuously upskill.

The **World Economic Forum estimates that 39 percent of core job skills will change by 2030**, which highlights the need for ongoing reskilling.[2] Reflecting this shift, **India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promotes lifelong learning pathways** and **flexible academic structures** that enable learners to re-enter education at various career stages.[3]

For institutions, this expands the learner profile to include **working professionals, career switchers and mid-career learners who return periodically to upskill,** in addition to traditional students.

2 Students are moving from passive participants to active co-creation

Students expect to engage actively with knowledge rather than simply receive it.

Globally, universities are adopting participatory learning approaches that emphasize collaboration, experimentation and real-world problem solving.[4] India's education reforms mirror this shift, with NEP 2020 focusing on **critical thinking, inquiry-driven learning and multidisciplinary education.**[3]

This signals a broader transition from instruction-led classrooms towards interactive learning environments where students can contribute meaningfully to the learning process.

3 Learners prefer greater personalisation and flexibility

As learner diversity grows, expectations around educational flexibility are increasing.

Students prefer more control over their **learning pathways, explore interdisciplinary interests** and **adjust pacing** based on career goals. India's **Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)** reflects this shift, which allows the accumulation and transfer of academic credits across institutions.[5]

Advances in AI are also enabling adaptive learning environments that personalise content and feedback, increasing demand for **more flexible and learner-centric education models**.[1]

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2. World Economic Forum. The Future of Jobs Report 2025. 2025
3. Ministry of Education, Government of India. National Education Policy 2020. 2020
4. UNESCO. Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education. 2021
5. National Council for Vocational Education and Training (NCVET). Draft Guidelines for Establishment and Operation of Academic Bank of Credit in VET Systems. 2024.

4 Educators are emerging as learning designers

As information becomes widely accessible through digital platforms and AI tools, the educator's role is no longer restricted to teaching.

Rather than primarily transmitting knowledge, educators are expected to **design learning experiences** that stimulate **inquiry, critical thinking** and **real-world application**. NEP 2020 emphasizes student-centric pedagogy and innovative teaching approaches to support this shift.[3]

As AI handles information retrieval and basic knowledge synthesis, educators play a key role in **guiding interpretation and helping learners navigate complexity**.

In an AI-enabled world where information is abundant, these trends indicate that the real value of higher education lies in cultivating judgment, curiosity and intellectual guidance.

5 Faculty skillsets require rapid enhancement

The changing role of educators demands capabilities beyond disciplinary expertise.

Faculty are expected to mentor diverse learner cohorts, facilitate interdisciplinary learning and integrate applied contexts into teaching. Recognising this need, the **All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) emphasizes continuous faculty development and quality improvement programmes**.[6]

Strengthening these capabilities will become essential for institutions seeking to deliver relevant and interactive learning experiences.

6 The human dimension of learning is becoming more important

Even as technology expands access to knowledge, meaningful learning remains deeply human.

Students increasingly **value mentorship, dialogue and intellectual guidance.** Technology cannot easily replicate these elements. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) highlights that relationships between educators and learners remain central to effective education systems.[4]

In an AI-driven world, human mentorship and academic community may become key differentiators for higher education institutions.

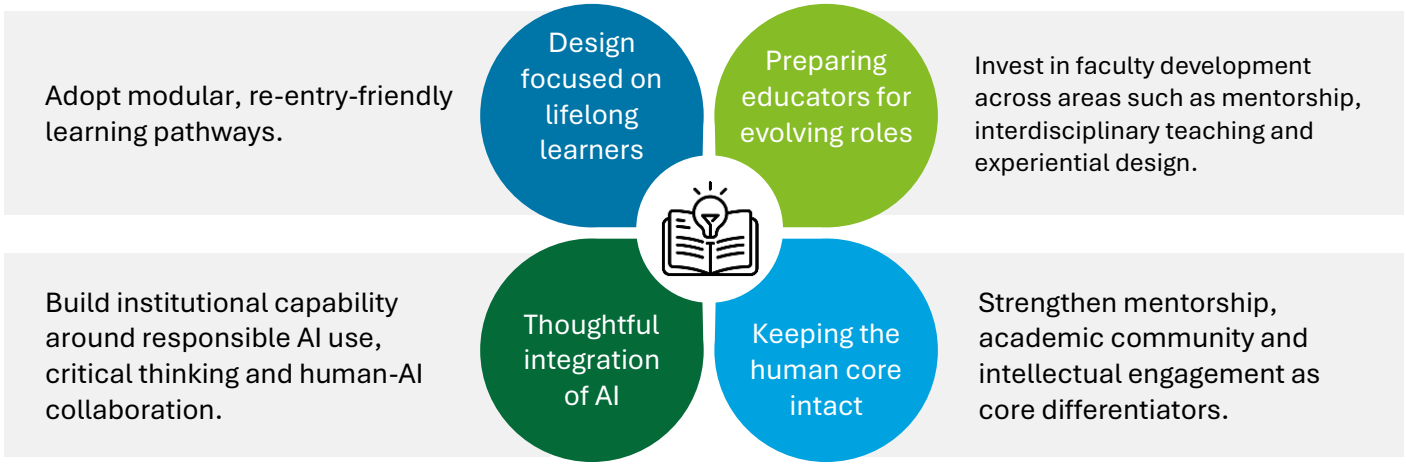
[6] All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). Quality Improvement Programme (QIP) Guidelines 2026–27. 2026.

What these shifts mean for higher education institutions

These shifts collectively point to a fundamental recalibration of higher education's human foundations.

Learners are becoming more autonomous, participatory and career-aware. Educators are taking on roles such as facilitators, mentors and designers of learning experiences. Therefore, institutions must rethink how they support both groups within the academic ecosystem.

Four priorities emerge here:



Institutions that balance technological innovation with strong human engagement will be best positioned to remain relevant in the long run.

Next in this series

If learning defines what institutions teach, and learners define who participates in education, the final dimension concerns **where learning takes place, i.e. the landscape**.

Higher education is no longer confined to physical campuses or a single mode of delivery. Learning occurs across workplaces, digital platforms, industry partnerships and global networks.

In the next few editions of the series, we will explore further developments in **higher education** and their implications for **institutions as they design future-ready learning environments**.

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3. Ministry of Education, Government of India. National Education Policy 2020. 2020. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf
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