

AI for international enrolment and admissions

Research and operating priorities
for university leaders



Publication information

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Purpose and scope

This report examines international recruitment, admissions and applicant support in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada and Australia, alongside selected destinations in Europe and Asia Pacific. It is intended for university leaders and teams responsible for recruitment, admissions, student services, technology and governance.

Research approach

The report synthesises official statistics, government guidance, public audits, original research and credential-evaluation guidance. Sources are numbered in the text and linked in the reference list. Dates, populations and measurement differences are retained where they affect interpretation. Calculations and recommendations are distinguished from reported findings.

This is a selective review of published evidence, not new institutional fieldwork, a systematic review or an evaluation of Merta's products. Figure 2 intervals are calculated from reported estimates and standard errors.

Interpretation and use

National measures are not always directly comparable. Study findings may not transfer to another institution or population. Policy summaries reflect the review date; current official guidance should inform individual cases. Recommendations support planning and supervised testing, with outcomes evaluated before expansion. Citing a source does not imply its endorsement of Merta.

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Executive findings

Universities should build a direct relationship with every applicant, including students introduced by recruitment agents. That means giving students access to their own records, clear information, dependable support and a route to a named university team. AI can make this service more practical, provided institutions retain responsibility for decisions and the evidence supporting them.

Recruitment conditions have changed. OECD first study residence permits fell from 2.130 million in 2023 to 1.856 million in 2024. All four major English-speaking destinations contracted on this measure; the rest of the OECD grew 5%. More recent national releases show continued pressure in several markets, although their measures and periods differ. Universities should plan around changes in new entrants, not assume that a large enrolled population guarantees the next intake. [1,2,6,9,12]

Agents remain useful, but incentives and oversight matter. Local knowledge, explanation and reassurance can help students. Commission arrangements can also create conflicts, and official investigations document misleading advice and fraud. These findings justify stronger controls; they do not establish that most agents are dishonest. Direct recruitment can give universities greater control over communication and data, but requires its own marketing, service and verification capacity. [21,22,23,24,25,26]

Verification must end in a resolved case. Automated extraction and anomaly detection can organise evidence. Authenticity requires an accepted verification route, such as confirmation from the issuer. A flag is not a finding of fraud, and an unresolved flag is not a completed control. Students may themselves be victims of deception. [25,26,27,28]

Evidence for AI is promising and uneven. A university chatbot trial improved enrolment for a specific group of committed students; a replication found no overall enrolment benefit. Adjacent workplace research suggests that AI assistance can improve service productivity. None of these results establishes a universal international-admissions uplift. [30,31,32,33]

Human-centred AI is an operating commitment. Students need correction, explanation and access to people. Staff need time, training and authority to challenge the system. Released capacity should support complex cases and better advising; headcount reduction is not an adequate measure of success. [34,35,36]

Priorities for the next intake

Establish the service baseline and total recruitment cost by channel. Pilot one bounded workflow, such as missing-document follow-up. Give it an approved knowledge base, a staffed escalation route and a named process owner. Evaluate accuracy, applicant effort, staff time and student outcomes before expanding it.

International mobility is being redistributed

The clearest comparable annual-flow evidence points to contraction across the Big Four. OECD data show first study residence permits falling in each destination between 2023 and 2024, with the largest proportional decline in Canada. Across the OECD, the 2024 total remained 17% above 2019, despite the year-on-year fall. Growth outside the Big Four shows that the overall decline was not uniform. [1]

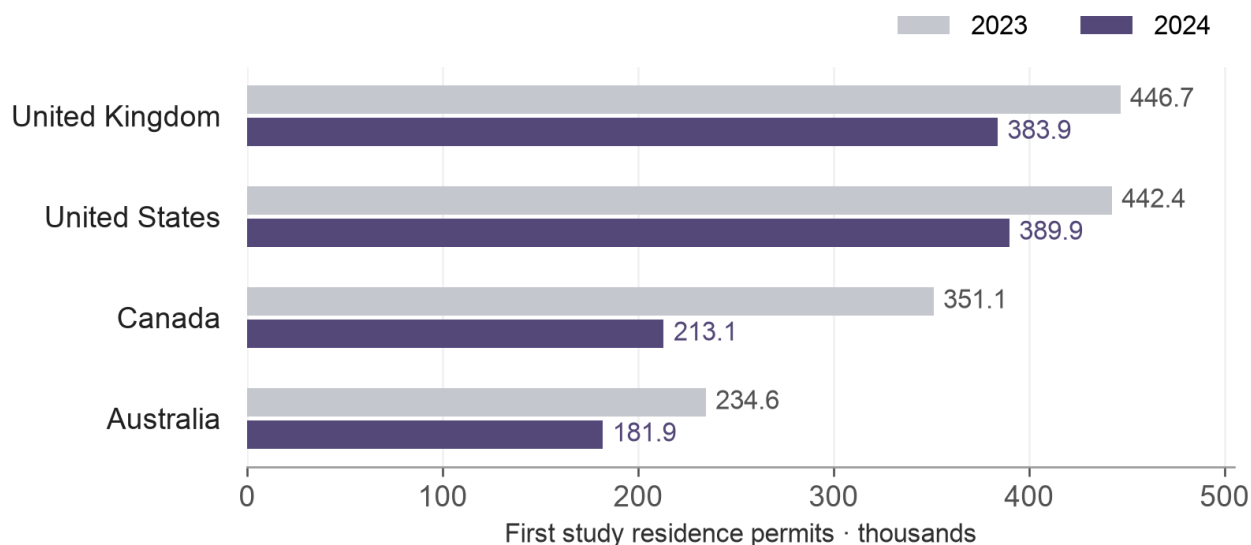


Figure 1. First study residence permits, thousands. OECD Table 1.3. Covers tertiary and language study; excludes intra-EU/EFTA mobility and professional training. Some values are estimates. These are annual flows, not total enrolled students or a worldwide count of new university entrants. [1]

Read the pipeline in stages

An enquiry indicates interest. A completed application indicates readiness for assessment. An offer is an institutional decision. A visa grant permits travel or stay under specified conditions. Enrolment confirms participation. None of these measures can safely substitute for another.

This distinction matters when a university has a large continuing cohort but fewer new arrivals. Revenue and classroom occupancy can temporarily conceal weakening recruitment. A useful institutional dashboard therefore separates new applications, complete files, offers, visa outcomes, arrivals and continuation, using consistent intake and programme definitions.

Plan for uncertainty rather than a single forecast

National totals do not explain why an individual applicant withdraws. Universities should record whether the obstacle was affordability, visa timing, academic fit, housing, a competing offer or an unresolved administrative issue. This is an operating recommendation, not a causal conclusion from the country statistics. It gives staff a better basis for deciding which problems university support can actually solve.

The United Kingdom and United States

United Kingdom

The Home Office granted **365,868 sponsored-study visas to main applicants** in the year ending June 2026, down **12%** year on year. This excludes dependants and measures visa grants, not unique arrivals. HESA separately recorded **685,565 international students** in UK higher education in 2024/25, down 6%; new international taught-master's entrants fell 10%. These measures describe different parts of the pipeline. [2,3]

Sponsor compliance has become more demanding. For Basic Compliance Assessments applied for from 1 June 2026, core requirements include a visa-refusal rate below 5%, enrolment of at least 95% and completion of at least 85%, subject to the guidance's definitions and transitional provisions. The completion threshold rises to 90% from June 2027. The Graduate route becomes 18 months for non-doctoral applications from 1 January 2027; doctoral graduates retain three years. [4,5]

University response. Join pre-CAS assessment, evidence retention, arrival follow-up and completion monitoring. CAS means Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies. Publish dated information and route individual sponsorship questions to authorised staff. UKVI states: "You are fully responsible for the actions of anyone who assigns CAS on your behalf." [26] AI can assemble a review file and track outstanding work; the sponsor still owns the decision.

United States

Open Doors counted **1,177,766 international students in 2024/25**, up 5%, including **294,253 Optional Practical Training participants**. New international students enrolling at their institution for the first time in fall 2024 numbered **277,118**, down 7%. A separate fall-2025 snapshot of more than 825 institutions reported **17% fewer new enrolments**. That snapshot is an institutional sample, not a complete national census. [6]

Admission does not remove immigration uncertainty. State Department guidance confirms online-presence review for F, M and J visa applicants. Nationality-specific issuance restrictions effective January 2026 have scope conditions and exceptions. The July 2026 rule replacing duration of status with fixed admission periods was postponed nationwide by a federal court on 14 September 2026; it must not be presented as an active requirement at this report's cut-off. [7,8,39]

University response. Maintain versioned guidance and distinguish current rules from proposed or postponed changes. International-student advisers should own individual status and travel advice. Where a student cannot arrive on time, staff need a clear deferral, refund and re-entry process. AI can surface affected cases and prepare communications, with review before consequential advice is sent.

Canada and Australia

Canada

IRCC records **114,975 new student arrivals in 2025**, compared with 292,875 in 2024: a calculated decline of **60.7%**. January–July 2026 arrivals were 28,200, 80% below the same period in 2024. This series excludes extensions and asylum claimants; it is not a university-only first-year count. The separate stock was 590,205 resident study-permit holders on 31 July 2026. [9]

For 2026, IRCC expects up to **408,000 permits**, comprising 155,000 new arrivals and 253,000 extensions. These are planned volumes, not actual arrivals. Master's and doctoral students at public designated learning institutions became exempt from provincial or territorial attestation letters in January 2026. For study outside Quebec, applications from 1 September 2026 require **C\$23,448** for one person's first-year living expenses, in addition to tuition and transportation. [10,11]

University response. Separate programme exemptions, new arrivals and renewals in forecasts. Check that funding information is current before asking students to act. Institutions must verify acceptance documents within **10 calendar days** of an IRCC request. [38] A tracked queue, deadline alerts and an accountable owner can prevent an otherwise valid application from failing through administrative delay. An AI opinion about a document does not satisfy issuer verification.

Australia

During January–June 2026, **687,810 individual international students** studied on student visas, down 7%. Of these, **96,311 were new students**, down 8%: they had no earlier-year enrolment in PRISMS, whose records begin in 2002. There were also **234,038 course commencements**, down 9%; one person can commence several courses. Higher-education enrolments nevertheless grew 2%, demonstrating why an all-sector headline is insufficient for university planning. [12]

The government retained a **295,000 National Planning Level for 2027**, the same as 2026. For offshore applications lodged from 14 November 2025, Ministerial Direction 115 links processing priority to provider allocation usage, with thresholds at 80% and 115%. Home Affairs explicitly distinguishes this from a visa cap or a change in grant criteria. [13,14]

University response. Keep course packages, provider priorities and applicant status accurate, and explain uncertainty without promising a visa or processing date. Receiving providers also face restrictions on commissions for qualifying onshore transfers after 31 March 2026, with exceptions and transitional arrangements. [40] Agent contracts and payment approvals need to reflect the applicable transaction, rather than assume one rule covers every recruitment relationship.

Other destinations are gaining ground

The competitive landscape extends beyond four English-speaking countries. Recent official releases show growth in several European and Asia Pacific destinations. The table preserves each source's definition: its totals should not be added together or treated as a like-for-like league table.

Destination	Reported population	Annual change	What the figure counts
Germany [15]	About 402,000 · 2024/25	+6%	Foreign nationals with university-entry qualifications from abroad or a German preparatory college
France [16]	443,500 · 2024/25	+3%	Foreign-nationality students in higher education; broader than mobile degree students
Ireland [17]	44,535 · 2024/25	+10.2%	Non-Irish-domiciled enrolments in HEA reporting institutions
New Zealand [18]	59,890 · 2025	+15%	International students in formal study at reporting tertiary providers, including universities and private training establishments
Japan [19]	408,069 · May 2025	+21.2%	International students including Japanese-language institutions and professional training
South Korea [20]	253,434 · 2025	+21.3%*	International students including degree, language and other training programmes

Table 1. Selected official population measures, not annual new arrivals. Changes use the preceding comparable period within each source. *South Korea change calculated from 208,962 in 2024. Sources [15,16,17,18,19,20].

What this means for recruitment

These data establish growth in the selected destinations; they do not prove that each student was diverted from the Big Four by visa restrictions. Course availability, price, language, existing networks and employment expectations can also shape a choice. Institutions should test those explanations through their own applicant research rather than infer motives from national totals.

For a university, diversification means more than opening a new country campaign. It requires competence in unfamiliar qualifications, reliable translation, realistic cost information and service across time zones. A promising market can become an operational weakness if the institution recruits students whose documents or questions it cannot assess promptly.

AI may help organise multilingual enquiries and unfamiliar document formats. Academic equivalence still requires trained evaluators and authoritative evidence. Where the institution lacks that capability, partnerships, staff development and credential expertise need to precede recruitment expansion.

Agents and direct recruitment need different controls

The UK Migration Advisory Committee recognises that “agents play an important role in the UK HE sector”. Its 2024 review also reported misleading information from some agents and subagents, while noting inadequate data to quantify poor practice. [22] Payment linked to enrolment and tuition can reward volume without rewarding accurate advice or student fit. The Ontario Auditor General documented this incentive problem in a 2021 audit of four public colleges. Commission itself is not evidence of misconduct. [43]

Commission is a material institutional expense. UNSW’s audited parent-university accounts recorded **A\$79.9 million in agent commissions in 2025**, down from A\$108.5 million in 2024. Separately, commission expenses across ten NSW public university groups rose A\$73.1 million in 2024. Neither observation establishes a global trend or the saving available from direct recruitment. [21,23]

Compare the full cost of serving an enrolled student

Cost to include	Agent recruitment	Direct recruitment
Acquisition	Commissions, events and university marketing	Paid media, events and university marketing
Service capacity	Agent management and retained university support	University outreach, advising and follow-up
Systems and implementation	CRM, integrations and contract administration	CRM, AI or other software, integration and training
Assessment and compliance	Admissions, verification, sponsorship and quality review	Admissions, verification, sponsorship and quality review
Cost recoveries	Recoverable commissions and supplier credits	Supplier credits and other cost recoveries

Table 2. A university cost worksheet. Include costs incurred on unsuccessful applicants. Allocate shared costs consistently and avoid double counting. Categories are recommendations, not observed price benchmarks.

Calculate all-in cost per enrolled student by dividing channel acquisition, service and allocated shared costs, less recoveries, by students enrolled at the agreed census date. Treat tuition refunds as revenue adjustments, not recruitment-cost recoveries. Compare matched programmes, markets and intakes. A direct channel is financially preferable only when its incremental service and acquisition costs are lower than the commissions and other channel costs it avoids, allowing for differences in enrolment and retention.

A direct relationship should exist in either channel. Students should receive official information, retain access to their application and know whom to contact independently. Universities should record agency relationships, inspect marketing, disclose relevant conflicts and review complaints. Australia’s Standard 4 places written agreements, monitoring and corrective action within provider responsibilities. [24] Channel choice should follow service quality, student outcomes and net contribution, rather than commission avoidance alone.

Trust requires evidence and accountable follow through

Fraud and corruption are documented risks, but their mechanisms differ. In Canada, an official IRCC briefing confirms that Brijesh Mishra pleaded guilty to three immigration-law charges in May 2024 and received a three-year sentence in a case involving fraudulent admission letters. The same briefing distinguishes genuine students deceived by bad actors from complicit applicants. This enforcement case does not measure fraud prevalence across the sector. [25]

Insider controls matter too. Western Australia's Corruption and Crime Commission documented bribery to alter IELTS scores at Curtin's former test centre, principally in 2009–2010. Shared passwords and weak controls featured in the investigation. This historical case concerns test-centre corruption; it is not evidence about present IELTS controls or all commissioned recruitment agents. [41]

Verification is a process with several possible outcomes

Canada's Auditor General found that the acceptance-letter system processed **97% of more than 841,000 letters** submitted between December 2023 and September 2025. The report classified 94.1% as genuine and 1.4% as potentially fraudulent; other categories included cancelled and manually processed letters. These categories must not be collapsed into "fake". In a sample of 51 flagged applications, required follow-up was missed in 14 cases. The central weakness was unresolved evidence, not simply detection coverage. [27]

ENIC-NARIC credential guidance supports checks proportionate to the evidence and cautions against presuming fraud without support. [28] AI can identify inconsistent names, dates or missing pages. It cannot establish that a plausible transcript was genuinely issued merely by reading it.

A practical verification sequence

Establish provenance. Preserve originals and submission history. Confirm who supplied the document and use independently obtained issuer contact details or an accepted verification service.

Separate extraction from judgement. Record whether a field was read correctly, whether the file is complete, whether the issuer confirmed it and whether any discrepancy remains. These are separate questions.

Resolve exceptions. Assign a trained reviewer, a deadline and a documented outcome. Protect the student's opportunity to explain or correct the record before a consequential decision, subject to applicable procedures.

Control internal access. Separate verification, admission and payment permissions. Log changes, investigate unusual overrides and prevent a single person or software agent from concealing its own actions.

These controls apply to direct and agent-assisted applications. A university should investigate evidence and conduct, rather than infer dishonesty from nationality, accent, writing style or recruitment channel.

Direct recruitment depends on dependable service

A direct application route is only useful if a student can complete it and obtain help. The university must replace the coordination that an intermediary might otherwise provide: explaining requirements, resolving uncertainty, checking progress and connecting the applicant to the right person.

Edified's 2025 Enquiry Experience Tracker used mystery shoppers at **103 institutions**. It reported that **86% received an answer**, leaving 14% unanswered. Warm, tailored responses were associated with seven times higher self-reported likelihood of further engagement than quick, impersonal replies. This measures stated intention in a mystery-shopping study, not actual enrolment conversion or an AI effect. [29]

Build a service that can finish the task

Make the next step explicit. Give each applicant a current checklist, deadline and owner. Distinguish an item not received from one received but awaiting review. Do not ask for the same document again because separate teams cannot see it.

Follow up on the obstacle. A student who has not paid a deposit may need help understanding funding, a refund rule or an unresolved offer condition. Repeating the payment link does not resolve those problems. Ask what remains uncertain and offer an appropriate route to advice.

Make handoffs work. When a case moves to a credential evaluator, finance team or international adviser, carry the question and relevant evidence with it. Confirm that the receiving team accepted responsibility. A chatbot's referral message is not proof that anyone helped.

Give staff a manageable exception queue. Prioritise by deadline, unresolved task and potential harm. Staff should be able to see why a case was escalated, inspect the original information and correct an inaccurate summary.

AI should reduce work for the student as well as the office

An assistant can retrieve approved information, translate explanations, prepare a checklist and identify a stalled application. Useful automation stops when the evidence is missing or the situation requires judgement. It should not create more messages, duplicate forms or a barrier between the student and a person.

The institution needs a clear service promise: what receives an immediate answer, what requires review, and when a human will respond. Measure time to a correct and usable resolution, not just time to first reply. Sample closed cases for answer correctness. Track repeated contacts and uploads, cases overdue against the promised response time, and applicant-reported effort. This turns direct recruitment into an accountable service rather than another acquisition channel.

Where AI can help across the applicant journey

An AI assistant generates or retrieves information. An **AI software agent** can also take approved actions across systems, such as creating a task or scheduling an appointment. This is different from a human recruitment agent. The distinction matters because an incorrect answer and an unauthorised system action create different risks.

Stage	Useful AI contribution	Human authority and boundary
Discovery and enquiry	Explain approved course, fee and process information; translate with source links	Communications owner approves content; advisers resolve ambiguous or individual advice
Application assembly	Extract fields, identify missing items, prepare a checklist and track deadlines	Admissions operations owns requirements; applicants can correct extracted data
Credential review	Compare names and dates; prepare evidence; request an authorised issuer check	Credential evaluator determines authenticity and equivalence; a flag is not a fraud finding
Assessment and offer	Summarise relevant evidence against an explicit rubric; draft questions	Trained staff make admission, scholarship and sponsorship decisions
Offer-holder follow-up	Ask about unresolved needs; arrange advice; send consented, relevant reminders	Counsellor handles affordability, sensitive circumstances and exceptions
Visa and arrival preparation	Track tasks and verified dates; draft checklists; arrange handoffs	Qualified staff own individual immigration advice and consequential commitments
System administration	Create approved tasks, draft messages and schedule appointments	Process owner defines permissions; log changes and require review for consequential actions

Table 3. Recommended operating boundaries, informed by NIST, UNESCO and credential-evaluation guidance. These are design proposals, not evidence that every workflow improves outcomes. [28,34,35]

Give software agents narrow permissions

Start with read-only access and drafts. Permit a routine action only after testing the complete workflow, including wrong-student matches, duplicate actions, failed integrations and recovery. Distinguish a proposed action from a committed change in the interface and audit log. Treat uploaded documents and external messages as untrusted content, never as instructions that can change the agent's permissions.

For a missing transcript, the agent checks the record, sends the relevant request, acknowledges the upload and stops reminders once the requirement is cleared. It routes unclear evidence to a reviewer. This complete loop is more useful than an isolated message. Rejection, a fraud finding or a visa promise remains outside its authority.

The evidence supports targeted assistance

Admissions research is more specific than a general claim that AI increases enrolment. The strongest studies here test task support and messaging; they do not validate every current language model or autonomous software agent.

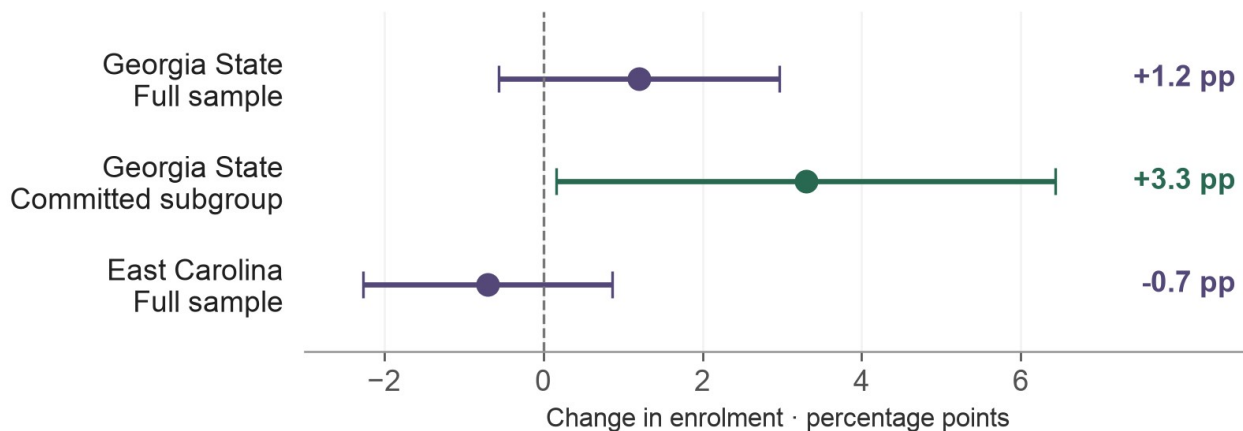


Figure 2. Estimated enrolment effect in percentage points; approximate 95% confidence intervals calculated as estimate ± 1.96 standard errors. GSU full sample: $n=7,489$; committed subgroup: $n=1,948$, control enrolment 84.6%. ECU full sample: $n=4,442$, control 93%; 2020 working paper. Different populations and implementations; not a pooled effect or a head-to-head comparison. [30,31]

At **Georgia State**, a randomised trial assigned 7,489 admitted students to usual support or added chatbot support. Among the 1,948 already committed students, enrolment increased **3.3 percentage points**. The full-sample estimate was not statistically significant. The often-quoted 21% figure refers to relative reduction in summer melt within the committed group, not 21% more enrolments. [30]

At **East Carolina**, a 2020 working-paper replication involving 4,442 intending students found **no statistically significant overall enrolment improvement**. Loan acceptance increased, but that is not evidence of improved financial well-being. Separately, large financial-aid messaging experiments covering more than 800,000 students found no overall effect on aid receipt or enrolment. These findings challenge the assumption that more reminders necessarily produce better outcomes. [31,32]

A workplace study of **5,172 customer-support agents** found roughly **15% higher issues resolved per hour** after AI assistance was introduced, with larger gains among less experienced workers. It offers a plausible model for spreading staff expertise, but it was one firm, used a non-random rollout and did not study university admissions. [33]

Implication. Test a defined student need and a complete service, including staff escalation. No international-admissions causal estimate in this evidence set justifies a guaranteed enrolment gain, a universal automation percentage or a staffing reduction.

Governance must be part of ordinary operations

AI systems can produce convincing errors, expose sensitive information and reproduce uneven outcomes. NIST recommends involving users and operators in prototyping and testing. [34] In a university, this means admissions staff, credential evaluators, international advisers, information security, accessibility specialists and students should help define what acceptable performance looks like.

Control the information and the authority

Maintain an approved knowledge base with an owner, effective date and review trigger for each consequential policy. Require answers to retain their supporting source. When policy changes, update the content and test affected questions before restoring automated advice. A fluent answer with an obsolete rule is a service failure.

Limit data to what the workflow requires. Define access, retention, vendor training restrictions, subcontractor use and cross-border processing before deployment. Keep sensitive documents out of general-purpose tools that lack institutional approval. Record which evidence and system version informed a case, while avoiding unnecessary duplication of personal data. These are recommended controls informed by NIST's risk framework. [34]

Keep consequential decisions with authorised staff who can inspect the original record and disagree. Audit a sample of accepted recommendations as well as overrides; otherwise, the institution may only discover errors that reviewers already suspected. Test relevant languages, document types and accessibility needs, and investigate unequal error rates rather than assuming a common average is sufficient.

Match governance to the use

The EU AI Act specifically addresses systems intended to determine access or admission to education. A general information assistant is not automatically the same as an admissions-ranking system; intended purpose and the classification rules matter. Emotion inference in educational institutions is prohibited subject to narrow medical or safety exceptions. [37] The Commission's current timetable places Annex III high-risk requirements from **2 December 2027**, following the 2026 Omnibus change. Existing prohibitions and other applicable duties remain relevant. [42]

Institutions should obtain jurisdiction-specific review before deployment and keep a policy register current. The operational priority is clear regardless of implementation date: people need understandable reasons, a correction route and access to meaningful human review.

Accountability. Name an executive sponsor and a process owner for each workflow. Give staff a way to stop automation, recover an incorrect action and report an incident without delay. Contract for access to logs, data export, change notifications and an exit route. Human oversight requires resources and authority, not simply a person's name beside an automated decision.

A human centred direction for the next intake

UNESCO calls for an approach that can “ensure a human-centred vision of these new technologies”. [35] For admissions, that means students understand their choices, retain control of their information and can reach someone who will take responsibility for a difficult case.



Illustrative photograph of collaborative work, not a participating university or study cohort. Annie Spratt / Unsplash.

Introduce AI with a clear workforce commitment

First 30 days. Map one intake journey, establish baseline service and cost, and choose a narrow problem. Agree how time saved will support advising and complex cases. Set acceptance thresholds for accuracy, consequential errors, time to human help and applicant effort before launch. Include staff and students in testing. Make chat, upload and authentication journeys accessible, with text and human alternatives. [36]

Days 31–60. Run the system in a supervised pilot with usual support retained. Randomise the offer of added support where practical; otherwise use a phased comparison and acknowledge weaker causal attribution. Predefine outcomes and include failed contacts and opt-outs in the evaluation.

Days 61–90 and the intake census. Review accuracy, unresolved cases, time to human help and full operating cost. Measure net staff time after quality review, escalation, maintenance and training, and record how released hours are used. Assess enrolment and continuation when those outcomes are observable. Stop or redesign a workflow if speed improves while accuracy, access or student effort worsens.

More direct contact is a strategic choice

The evidence supports stronger university-owned relationships; it does not establish that agents will disappear. A likely useful model combines dependable direct service, accountable local partners and AI support for routine work. This is a strategic judgement, not a measured forecast.

Success includes an informed decision to defer or choose another course. AI makes admissions more human when it gives staff time to listen, reduces repeated explanations and helps a student reach the right person. Those outcomes should be explicit conditions of investment.

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