

Discussion paper

REIMAGINING HIGHER EDUCATION IN 2026

**Insight on Leadership and Learning: A year in conversation
with the President's Office, Chancellery, and policy leaders.**

**Reimagining
the future of
Higher Education**

with Professor Judyth Sachs and
leaders in education.

Studiosity



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Foreword from Prof Judyth Sachs

Hosting these distinguished global leaders on the "Reimagining Higher Education" podcast series has been an extraordinary privilege these past five years, and a continuous source of insight and energy.

This discussion paper - that you read now, perhaps over a tea or coffee, or perhaps as you flip back to a particular theme - serves as a synthesis of these discussions around the world. It identifies and explores the most prominent themes across all interviews these past 12 months.

What resonated most profoundly with me throughout these conversations was the leaders' enduring belief in the joy of learning and the non-negotiable value of curiosity. While we also inevitably tackled complex and 'wicked problems' - like institutional finance and the impact of genAI, every leader ultimately returned to the human element: the spark that ignites a student's desire to ask "why?". This innate curiosity, which many lamented is often lost in more prescriptive paths and under some current assessment models, must be desperately nurtured as the foundational skill in this world of constant disruption.

Many leaders articulated a core purpose - to create citizens who possess the courage to fail, the resilience to adapt, and the capacity to learn and pursue new knowledge. The insights presented in the following reflect the dedication and bravery of those interviewed in leading their institutions in this pursuit - to navigate uncertainty, enable innovation, and ensure the continued relevance and value of university education in this more complex world.



My advice for the academy worldwide is that we need more curiosity and bravery.

It is clear that the modern university must be defined by its adaptability, community, and deep connection to its own students. This synthesis offers a candid view from the frontline of this global endeavour. I also extend special thanks to my colleagues around the world - the Studiosity Academic Advisory Board - in exploring these ideas with so many leaders and educators.

Prof Judyth Sachs

Chief Academic Officer, Studiosity

Executive summary

Recurring and significant themes, from one-to-one interviews with the presidents office and chancellery, on their path to leadership and what's next for the sector.

There are clear themes that emerge from conversations with leadership. Notably:

- **Human connection (pg. 6)** as part of a valuable and successful student experience;
- The increasing **complexity of student lives (pg. 11)** marked by financial pressures;
- The necessity of robust **industry and community engagement (pg. 14)**;
- **Student-centric support and holistic wellbeing (pg. 17)** as table stakes for a sustainable university experience;
- The constant need for institutional **adaptability (pg. 20)** and change;
- Robust, future-proof management of **generative AI (pg. 24)**;
- Institutional **financial management (pg. 28)** by institutional leadership; and
- **The path to leadership** in the academy (pg. 31).



Jack Goodman, Studiosity Founder, with Professor Judyth Sachs, multi- DVC-A and Provost at leading universities, now also Chief Academic Officer at Studiosity, and oftentimes lead podcast anchor.

"We can use AI tools to help do more personalised learning, and students can learn in different locations. But it doesn't change the fact that you still learn a lot from your peers. **You still learn when you get together with people and you ask them questions. You know, it helps to have these interlocutors. It helps to have uncomfortable experiences."**

Dr Kyle Long

President of the American University in Dubai, UAE



Dr Ashraf Mahate

Studiosity Academic Advisory Board - Middle East



Your hosts



Prof Judyth Sachs

Chief Academic Officer, Studiosity Academic Advisory Board

Former Deputy Vice Chancellor, Provost Macquarie University and Former Pro Vice Chancellor learning and teaching at Sydney University

Professor Judyth Sachs was PVC Learning and Teaching at The University of Sydney, Deputy Vice Chancellor and Provost at Macquarie University, and was appointed as Special Advisor in Higher Education at KPMG.



Dr Ashraf Mahate

Studiosity Academic Advisory Board - Middle East

Chief Economist Trade and Economic Development, Dubai Government

Dr Mahate embarked on his career as an academic initially with Bayes Business School part of City University (London University) in 1990. With extensive regional experience Dr Mahate has been a consultant with the International Trade Center which is part of the World Trade Organisation and the United Nations Committee on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) as well as the Inter-American Development Bank.



Dr Noreen Golfman

Studiosity Academic Advisory Board - North America

Former Provost and Vice President Academic at Memorial University, St John's, Newfoundland

Dr Golfman is a literature and film studies scholar, media writer, commentator, and actor, and was named the 2020 Woman of the Year by the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists. Dr Golfman was also Dean of Graduate Studies at Memorial University, and two-term president of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences and President of the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies. She is also the founding director of the St. John's International Women's Film Festival.



Prof Petra Wend

Studiosity Academic Advisory Board - UK & Europe

Former Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Queen Margaret University

Professor Petra Wend has worked consistently throughout her career as an academic to cross borders, geographically and socially, in order to realise the full potential of the institutions with which she was associated, and has a significant profile of accolades, and invited lectures in the international higher education world. Professor Wend has been a member or Chair of a significant number of national and international boards.



Prof Cliff Allan

Studiosity Academic Advisory Board - UK & Europe

Former Vice-Chancellor, Birmingham City University

Professor Allan was a Board member of Universities UK and non-Executive Director of several regional and national bodies. Prior to BCU he held Deputy Vice-Chancellor positions at Sheffield Hallam and Teesside Universities respectively. Before these senior university leadership roles, Cliff was Deputy CEO at the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and for many years Head of Teaching and Learning at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

Theme 1. The (Enduring) Power of Human Connection

Overall, 44% of higher education leaders interviewed in 2025 commented on the fundamental importance of human connection and peer relationships within the university ecosystem. Leaders consistently emphasised that beyond formal academic instruction, the social fabric of the university - and informal knowledge transfer - plays a crucial role in student development, belonging, and success.

“We can use AI tools to help do more personalised learning, and students can learn in different locations. But it doesn't change the fact that you still learn a lot from your peers. You still learn when you get together with people and you ask them questions. You know, it helps to have these interlocutors. It helps to have uncomfortable experiences.” **Dr Kyle Long, President of the American University in Dubai, UAE**

“Our students more and more are becoming peer supporters. So they are learning really early about mental health and bringing that to the way that they interact with one another. That's on the really heartening side of how young people will move forward and be our next leaders. They will figure it out together.” **Dr Betsy Cantwell, President of Utah State University, United States**

“I walk around, I'm known as the walking chancellor, because I like to walk around campus a lot... you'll see a very vibrant campus, lots of student activities. There's a real buzz on campus. There's a lot of connection on campus.” **Dr James Beeby, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, United States**

Dr Ronald Rochon, California State University Fullerton, United States

“When I walk across campus, I want every student to feel seen and valued. The essence of higher education isn't in the lecture halls; it's in the relationships we build. That sense of belonging — that's where transformation really begins.”

“The essence of higher education isn't in the lecture halls; it's in the relationships we build.”

1. The (Enduring) Power of Human Connection (continued)

**Dr Sudhindra Shamanna, Manipal
Academy of Higher Education, Dubai**

"The first thing we try to build in any programme is a sense of community. Students who feel connected to one another, to faculty, to the university — they persist longer, perform better, and enjoy the experience far more."

**Professor Dato Elizabeth Lee Fuh Yen,
Sunway Education Group, Malaysia**

"Our mission has always been about community. Students don't just come to Sunway for classes — they come to be part of a family. That human touch, the warmth, the relationships, those are what define our institution."

"One of the most critical pieces for students is to get that relationship with faculty members... if we lose the ability of students and faculty members to have connections... I think that's gonna take the heart and soul out of universities."

**Dr Deborah MacLatchy, President, Wilfrid
Laurier University, Canada**

"We learn so much from being with each other, and while we're involved, as much as anybody is in online learning, that that residential experience, that experience of sharing ideas with each other remains important."

**Professor Grant Robertson, Vice-Chancellor
of the University of Otago, New Zealand**

"I was with people who were third years in my first year... And actually most of my friends, my really good friends even to this day were a year above me. So they'd sort of worked out how the system works."

**Vivienne Stern, Chief Executive Officer of
Universities UK, United Kingdom**



Host: Prof Petra Wend
Studiosity Academic Advisory Board



1. The (Enduring) Power of Human Connection (continued)

"I don't know how anyone could do these jobs if they really didn't understand the connection and the impact that they can have with their students. My whole philosophy to being a leader is it's based upon working with humans, working with human beings. Relationships are the most important thing to anyone's success." **Susan Edwards, President of Wright State University, United States**

"The things that I remember most strongly are associated with people. So I strongly believe that I'm here today because I had the opportunity to meet and to work with some quite extraordinary people on that journey. People who challenged me, who opened my eyes to ways of thinking about things that I'd never even conceived of before, and then people who encouraged me to continue on the journey." **Professor Neil Quigley, Vice-Chancellor of University of Waikato, New Zealand**

Professor George Williams, Vice-Chancellor and President of Western Sydney University, Australia stressed the university's role in social cohesion: "I think there's likely to be an increasing need of universities as a place of social cohesion and connectedness for growing and supporting the development of well rounded citizens."

Dr Alison Morrison-Shetlar, President of the University of Lynchburg, United States: "The number one thing for a student at Lynchburg is the sense of belonging, being able to feel like they are part of something that is bigger than they are, but then all together, they're making this fabulous experience."

"I was able to sort of get deeply engaged in campus and the different activities, I loved every second of it." For AASCU, Dr Welch reflects on peer relationships at the leadership level - as a "huge part of what we do" to combat the "lonely place" of leadership. **Dr Chuck Welch, President of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, United States**

Dr Zia Ul-Qayyum, Executive Director of the Higher Education Commission in Pakistan recalls: "We had a very lively student body where we would have these student unions, sports activities being organised." He highlighted that "You learn a lot from your peers when you are studying in a university life."



1. The (Enduring) Power of Human Connection (continued)

Dr Abtar Kaur, Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation, Malaysia

"I always tell my students — learning is a social experience. You learn best when you connect, collaborate, and share. Technology can never replace that human bond, and as educators, we must nurture it."

"You would run into people at the cafeterias, the library, and seminars and people always buzzing with ideas and you can talk to them about a whole host of things." "I had a support group in an informal sense, fellow PhD students working in more or less the same areas. But by and large I was left on my own and I did a lot of learning by my own."

Professor Tan Tai Yong, President of the Singapore University of Social Sciences, reflecting on his time at Cambridge.

Dr Stacy Young, Manchester University, United States: "When students see that someone genuinely cares about them — not just about their grades but about who they are — it changes everything. That human connection is what keeps them engaged, especially when life gets tough."

"That human connection is what keeps them engaged."

Professor Adeeba Kamarulzaman, Monash University, Malaysia:

"One of the most important things we've learned from the pandemic is that connection matters — students need to feel part of a community. Whether it's through peer support, mentoring, or simply being on campus, that sense of belonging is fundamental to their success."

**Host / Anchor: Prof Judyth Sachs**

Chief Academic Officer, Studiosity Academic Advisory Board

1. The (Enduring) Power of Human Connection (continued)

"The peer groups that you end up gravitating towards are going to have a huge influence on you as well." **Dr Graham Carr, President of Concordia University, Canada** also noted the transformative potential of study abroad and work-integrated learning in exposing students to "other cultures and other realities."



Theme 2. Financial Pressures and the Work-Study Dynamic for Students

Just under one third (31%) of leaders discussed the increasing financial pressures on students and the pervasive need to balance both work and study - often in contrast to leaders' own memories of undergraduate study. The leaders acknowledge that rising tuition costs, living expenses, and the general economic climate necessitate more students taking on substantial part-time (or even full-time) employment, which in turn can impede their ability to fully engage with their studies and participate in campus life. As a 'wicked' problem, it was often noted that this complexity requires flexible support mechanisms and a likely re-evaluation of strategy to ensure equitable opportunity.

"I've spent time at our food pantry and our dinners for our students as well, and speaking directly to our students and understanding why they have to skip meals, why study is poverty for too many of them. One student I met who sleeps in their car. And this meal, we were serving food to students, it was the one regular meal of the week that this student would get. And so I think... if you're not informed by the personal and lived experience of your students, how can you serve them?" **Professor George Williams, Vice-Chancellor and President, Western Sydney University, Australia.**

Dr Chuck Welch, President of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, United States: "It's incredibly expensive and we've seen those expenses go up over that 30-year period." Dr Welch criticises the "one-size-fits-all approach" to higher education costs, which obscures that "the vast majority of our students don't pay anywhere near that [sticker price]." He stressed that many students "don't have that luxury" of not working, "They're working. They have families."

"...if you're not informed by the personal and lived experience of your students, how can you serve them?"



2. Financial Pressures and the Work-Study Dynamic for Students (continued)

"If I could wave a magic wand, I would love us to have a lot more in our endowment so that we could give more scholarships to students to keep the cost down and give more opportunities for study abroad or high-impact practices. A lot of our students work... I'd like to see us be able to do more to help defray the cost of attendance for students. When I went to college in England, it didn't cost me a penny to go to college... I can't imagine going to college as an 18-year-old and having to think, how are students going to be able to afford it?" **Dr James Beeby, Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, United States.**



"I'd like to see us be able to do more to help defray the cost of attendance for students."

Professor Grant Robertson, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Otago, New Zealand: "The least pleasant thing I think for students is the pressure that they feel, the pressure of getting through their degree as quickly as they can, it's costly." He noted that students "don't have as much opportunity I don't feel to sit back and think, and absorb, and take their time."



2. Financial Pressures and the Work-Study Dynamic for Students (continued)

Dr Susan Edwards, President of Wright State University, United States, directly linked financial barriers to student access and retention: "the number one obstacle I find with all of my students that either can't come or drop out or stop out, is finance." She spoke of students "working two, three jobs to put themselves through college."

Vivienne Stern, Chief Executive Officer of Universities UK, United Kingdom, connected financial pressures directly to the student experience: "It's quite hard to see, how many students are really being given a fair opportunity to succeed in their studies without having to do so much part-time work that they're just held back from doing the kind of things we talked about." She added, "If I had had to keep down two jobs working in a cafe or a bar or in a shop, I wouldn't have got to write and direct and act in plays or tour Europe."

"...how many students are really being given a fair opportunity to succeed in their studies without having to do so much part-time work that they're just held back..."

Dr Marc Poulin, Acting President of Abu Dhabi School of Management, UAE, noted the high cost of education in the UAE due to tuition dependency: "it makes education expensive." He acknowledged that students seek "opportunities to generate their own income" but often face limited options.

Dr Deborah MacLatchy, President of Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada, observed that students today have "more challenges financially... lots of mental health challenges, challenges with housing, food precarity." She highlighted the dilemma for universities: "The challenges with all of that is that those supports and everything else need to be financially supported as well... trying to find the balance between the great educational experience... with the duty of care supports that we have so that students can be successful."



Theme 3. Forging Futures: Industry and Community Engagement

The strategic integration of universities with industry and local communities was a recurring theme, discussed by 31% (10 out of 32) of institutional leaders. It was framed as crucial for ensuring the relevance of academic programs, enhancing graduate employability, and addressing societal needs broadly. As economies demand agile and skilled workforces, higher education leaders are focused on delivering valid degrees, co-creating curricula with industry partners, facilitating experiential learning, and cementing their university or institution as a vital 'anchor' in the region.

Professor Freddy Boey, President of City University of Hong Kong described:

"Universities can never be regional, certainly not local. It must always be international." He explained how the university encourages "innovation" through programs like "how to do a start up company" and sends students "to Kazakhstan or send them to Indonesia or somewhere where they really got to quickly adapt."

Dr Maurits van Rooijen, Rector of the University of Europe, Germany, emphasises the importance of dialogue: "the key thing when you work with industry is the ability to listen to industry... my interactions with companies is really a dialogue." He also highlighted the practical experience gained through placements: "quite a big percentage of the University of Europe in particular, those students actually spend in companies for small projects, for company visits, but also for big placements."

"The problem statements that my students work on are industry problems rather than textbook problems... So one of the advantages I feel doing that is that the students are trained to appreciate that there is no one ideal solution to the problem."

Professor Kee Chaing Chua, President, Singapore Institute of Technology.

"The problem statements that my students work on are industry problems rather than textbook problems..."



3. Forging Futures: Industry and Community Engagement

"I think getting exposed to other cultures and other realities is part of growing as a person. Some students begin a programme and they're too far into it before they start to explore what they could be doing. They miss opportunities to capitalise on mobility and work-integrated learning possibilities." "The work-integrated learning piece is so important... At Concordia, we had close to 5,000 students in work-integrated learning last year, undergraduate and graduate, including students from fine arts working with cultural and arts organisations or in the cinema industry. The opportunities are there across the board, but we haven't been as compelling in telling that narrative."

Dr Graham Carr, Concordia University, Canada

Dr Susan Edwards, President of Wright State University, United States, argued for closer collaboration: "we have to work closer with our partners. Higher education for a long time was very good at telling business what they should and shouldn't do. We have to actually bring the businesses into the university to have the conversation around what should our curriculum look like."

"We have to actually bring the businesses into the university..."

Dr Albert Chau, Vice-President Education at Hong Kong Baptist University, spoke to a "transdisciplinary approach" involving "not only the collaboration between academic disciplines, but also the collaboration between different sectors - academia, the government, the business, the NGOs." He noted, "We work very closely with the industry."



3. Forging Futures: Industry and Community Engagement

"Serving Western Sydney, we're defined by our region and we're unusual as a university because we've got 10% of the Australian population in our backyard... we need to be the university that Western Sydney needs and deserves." He advocated for "industry partnerships" and "earn as you learn."

Professor George Williams, Vice-Chancellor and President of Western Sydney University, Australia.

Dr Kyle Long, President of the American University in Dubai, UAE, highlighted his institution's strong industry ties: "Our mission at the American University in Dubai is rooted in student success... We have an employability rating north of 90% with its year in year out that that makes us the best in Dubai." Dr Long mentioned new degree programs in AI and business, and game design, developed in response to market needs.

Professor Tod Laursen, Chancellor of the American University of Sharjah, UAE, emphasises work-integrated learning: "every student in the university, including the arts and social science students, has to do at least one paper equivalent of work-integrated learning." He noted a high student desire "to be involved in startup and entrepreneurship activities."

Professor Damon Salesa, Vice-Chancellor of Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand, "That sort of speaks to our broader mission, our social mission, and I think if you looked at the university and asked what's distinctive about it, a lot of it is its connection with industry, with the workforce, very much sort of in the trenches with New Zealand's economy and its society, you know, a university that lives and dies with the communities it serves."

"...a university that lives and dies with the communities it serves."

Spotlight on: Employability

For many students, a degree is an investment to increased *life chances* - which can include employment opportunity. To ensure the continued value of graduates' degrees to industry and to enhance graduate employability in an AI era, support for core communication and critical thinking skills is crucial. Universities are prioritising the development and evidence of core skills as part of showing that students are indeed learning as a result of their degree experience, and that the universities' graduates remain valuable to wider society and industry.

Theme 4. Holistic student care

44% of leaders referenced a strong commitment to their institution's 'students first' approach ('students first' ethos, 'wellbeing', 'mental health', and enabling 'curiosity', and a focus on the whole, well-rounded individual were recurring ideas). Holistic student care and learning development were core themes across the interviews, particularly related to discussions around pedagogical approaches, support services, and institutional mission.

"The University of Lynchburg is in the business of changing lives... to be able to say, this is the place that made that happen. And so we call those the four P's, place, people, passion, purpose. And that's the transformational experience." **Dr Alison Morrison-Shetlar, President, University of Lynchburg, United States.**

Professor Kee Chaing Chua, President of the Singapore Institute of Technology:

"the education that we give our students has to be holistic in the sense that it is not just focused on getting a job... We also have to prepare them to be lifelong learners, given that there are so many disruptions in industry today." He outlined four "SITizen-DNA" attributes, including being a "thinking tinkerer" and "grounded in the community."

Professor Tan Tai Yong, President of the Singapore University of Social Sciences,

described a shift from a "functional university" to one focused on making "student life something memorable for our students and meaningful." This included creating "University Town" as a community space for learning, social life, and recreation.

Professor Nic Smith, Vice-Chancellor of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, noted the importance of fostering "curiosity" and moving beyond rote learning: "as an undergraduate often you are given content and asked to respond to it and that misses some of the creativity a bit, misses some of that sense of, of inquisitive learning where you find your own journey."

Dr Maurits van Rooijen, Rector of the University of Europe, Germany,

emphasised the importance of teaching students how to learn from setbacks: "your students need to know what is good failure and what is bad failure... good failure is you tried, you thought it through, and it didn't work. And then you sit back and say, why didn't it work? That is good failure."



4. Holistic student care (continued)

The rising incidence of mental health challenges among students was a recurring sub-theme within discussions.

Dr Betsy Cantwell, President of Utah State University, United States, noted, "this all wells up in a lot more mental health challenges that young people are having. We focus a lot on how - how can we not just say we just need more mental health counsellors - but how can we understand the kind of broad panorama of mental health challenges."

"Their voice and their perspectives are, are really important because if we assume that what somebody experienced 20 years ago is the same as it is today, we would be very wrong."

This sentiment is echoed across institutions, emphasising a shift from reactive solutions to proactive, integrated well-being strategies.

"I think it's really valuable that students do feel they can talk about how they're feeling and that they know that there are sources where they can get support and that universities regard it as an obligation to give support." **Professor Dame Sally Mapstone, University of St Andrews, United Kingdom**



4. Holistic student care (continued)

Professor George Williams, Vice-Chancellor and President of Western Sydney University, Australia: "I'm driven in leading this organisation that every student should have the opportunity that I did." He highlighted challenges like food insecurity among students and his efforts to ensure "studying should be easy with us."

Dr Albert Chau, Vice-President Education at Hong Kong Baptist University, stated that the university's aim is "to prepare students who are future ready... Who are highly adaptive, are highly accommodating, who will be able to work with peoples from all over the world, different races, different backgrounds, different aspirations, different abilities."

Dr Kyle Long, President of the American University in Dubai, UAE, noted that their curriculum aims to "help people to transform and become better versions of themselves."

Professor Freddy Boey, President of City University of Hong Kong, advised students to "be educated and don't just get a degree." He urged them to "Learn to adapt. Learn to understand. Learn to ask why. Be curious and be well beyond exam questions."

Dr Susan Edwards, President of Wright State University, United States, outlined her dedication: "My whole philosophy to being a leader is it's based upon working with humans, working with human beings. Relationships are the most important thing to anyone's success." She added that they have "every opportunity for a student to succeed here."

Professor Tod Laursen, Chancellor of the American University of Sharjah, UAE, emphasised the institution's commitment to a "liberal arts core" for a "well roundedness in all walks of life." He further advised students: "if you find a way where you're serving others, then you never have to worry about a purposeless existence."

"if you find a way where you're serving others, then you never have to worry about a purposeless existence."



Theme 5. Adapting to change

From 'cruise ships' to 'aircraft carriers', constant adaptation and change within higher education is a pervasive theme that emerged from the conversations, explicitly discussed by 38% of interviewees. For example, conversations centred around explicit discussion of the pace of change, institutional adaptability/agility, and the challenge of changing large, complex institutions. Leaders acknowledged that the traditional strategies and models of universities are insufficient for the current and future global landscape.

"I think that the... things that have conferred value in other contexts, but actually reprioritise and rethink about how they're delivered, because we should be the antidote. We should be the force for binding people together, for bringing humility and respect and evidence and understanding. But we can't do it the way we've always done it. We have to do it in different ways." **Professor Nic Smith, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.**

Professor Kee Chaing Chua, President of the Singapore Institute of Technology:

"universities have to adapt." He pointed out that "the future is changing so rapidly and the pace of change is getting faster and faster."

Professor Tan Tai Yong, President of the Singapore University of Social Sciences, drew on his historical training to emphasise that "universities are not static institutions... as contexts change, as demands change, as the world changes, universities have to adapt." He added, "I always make the point that universities are one of the longest functioning institutions in the world alongside the church and the military because they are able to adapt."

"Universities are one of the longest functioning institutions in the world alongside the church and the military because they are able to adapt."



5. Adapting to change (continued)

“We need to continue the principles that we have identified and the curriculum reform that we have started. Along the way, we have to be highly adaptive toward these changes. Before late 2022 we all knew Generative AI was around, but the impact on education was not that direct. And then all of a sudden it came out, and we had to make adjustments within a couple of months.”

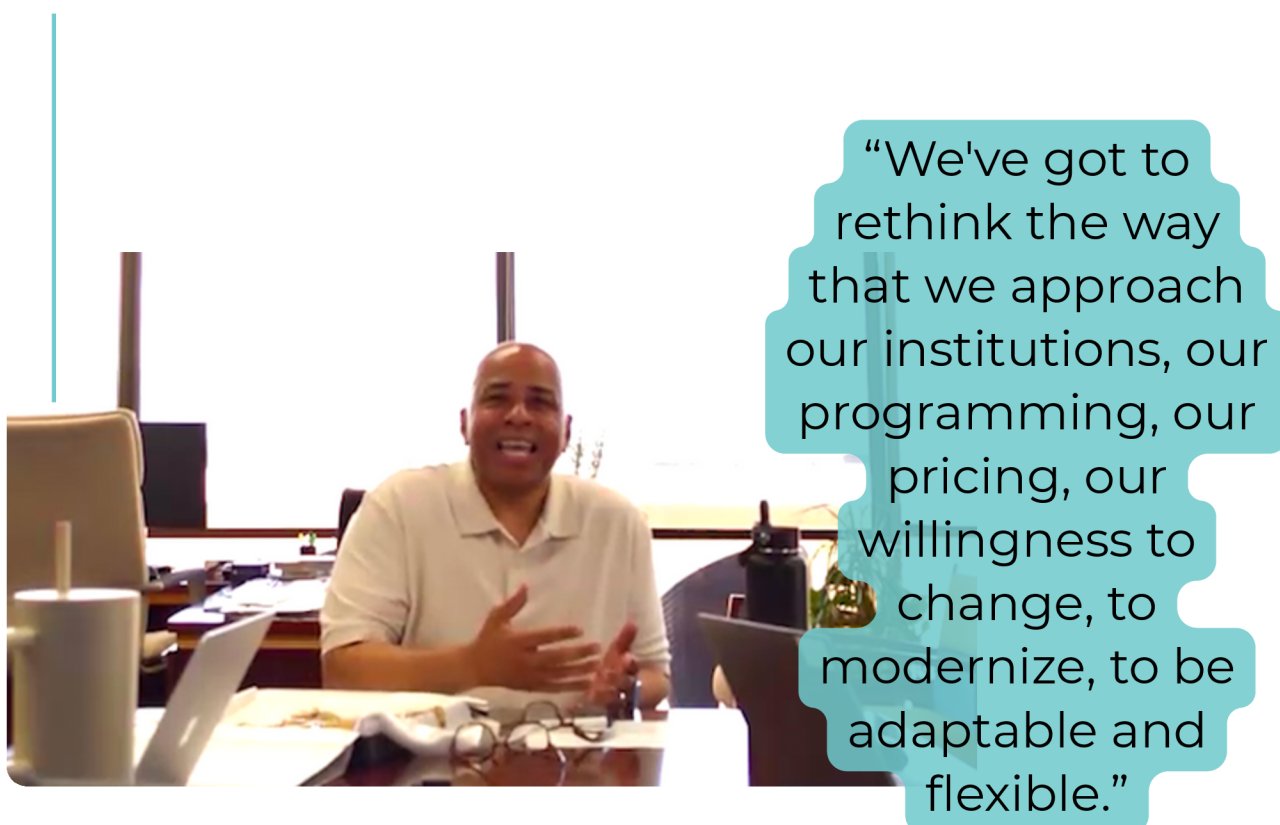
Professor Lily Kong, Singapore Management University

“We’ve got to rethink the way that we approach our institutions, our programming, our pricing, our willingness to change, to modernize, to be adaptable and flexible. If we do that, we’ll survive this, because it’s still the single greatest investment an individual can make in their life.”

Dr Ronald Rochon, California State University Fullerton, United States

Professor George Williams AO, Vice-Chancellor and President of Western Sydney University, Australia

discussed the book ‘Tested’ by Australian cricket captain, Pat Cummins. “He interviews lots of people about challenging moments in their life and how they came through it and what they relied upon to get through it, which is sort of quite opposite to what we’re going through in the sector at the moment. And, you know, Pat’s from Western Sydney, great connections here, you, know, I love sport. I think that’s a real leveller in Australia. So yeah, that’s the book I’ve been reading with stories in it that have made me reflect on myself as a leader and how I navigate a turbulent time.”



5. Adapting to change (continued)

Dr Maurits van Rooijen, Rector of the University of Europe, Germany,

underscored that change is inevitable and must be embraced: "change happens which you haven't asked for and change isn't always nice. But don't get too worked up about it... you cannot stop that. You're naive if you think you can stop that."

Vivienne Stern, Chief Executive Officer of Universities UK, United Kingdom: "this sector has gone through the process of massification... That has been a good thing... But we are still evolving the kind of mechanisms to cope with what is a fundamentally different system."

Professor Freddy Boey, President of City University of Hong Kong, emphasised speed: "Universities need to redefine themselves. If you start looking back, you are driving the car with a rear view mirror. You're not going to go anywhere fast in this new world." He stressed, "it's advantageous not to have the kind of baggage, the traditions, and all kinds of stakeholders. But to look forward, with a bunch of people who dare to, to change and move forward."

Dr Deborah MacLatchy, President of Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada, acknowledged the inherent difficulty in changing large institutions: "It's hard. You know, universities are big complex plants that don't change quickly."



Dr Alison Morrison-Shetlar, President of the University of Lynchburg, United States,

shared her go-to read for navigating the complexities of higher education leadership. "My recommendation for anyone who is in these positions is to read Mel Robbins' book, 'Let Them', because that basically synthesises, you cannot control what people say, think, or do. You can only control your reaction to it. And so again, surround yourself with good people and know that you're doing the right thing for the right reason. And the right reasons is our students."

5. Adapting to change (continued)



"You've got to change course. And it's really incredibly difficult."

Dr Albert Chau, Vice-President Education at Hong Kong Baptist University noted that the "pace of change is getting faster and faster." He stated, "our aim was to prepare students who are future ready... Who are highly adaptive, are highly accommodating."

Dr Susan Edwards, President of Wright State University, United States, recognised the "major pivot" from academic-centric to student, community, and business-centric. She used the analogy: "To make a change in a university is like turning an aircraft carrier in a very short period of time as you're heading towards the iceberg. You've got to change course. And it's really incredibly difficult."

Dr Graham Carr, President of Concordia University, Canada, expressed frustration with institutional inertia: "It's always just flummoxed me that universities as places which put a premium on discovery, and innovation, and creativity are unbelievably resistant to the smallest of changes." He believes "the universities that can figure out a way to move, to change more quickly will probably have better survival instincts in the highly disruptive period that we're in now."



Dr Chuck Welch, President of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, United States, characterised higher education as a "cruise ship" that "takes a long time and it's difficult... to turn that cruise ship around." He hopes institutions have "learned to be more nimble" from recent historical crises.

Theme 6. The Opportunity and Challenge of genAI

Generative AI was, of course, a prominent and consistent theme across the interviews, directly addressed by 41% of all interviewees this year. Leaders acknowledge AI's transformative potential, moving beyond "moral panic" to a considered, strategic approach for high-risk areas of teaching, learning, assessment. The focus is on developing policies, training faculty, and equipping students with necessary critical thinking skills - the latter still a persistent, core deliverable of higher education.

"AI is a tool. And I think we need to be very careful not to think of it as AI is a standalone degree program. It may be, but really it should be interwoven into every discipline across the campus. And each discipline is going to use it in a very different way." **Dr Susan Edwards, President, Wright State University, United States.**

Professor Kee Chaing Chua, President of the Singapore Institute of Technology, stated, "we encourage our students to say, by all means, use AI as the first draft. But not lock, stock and barrel, just submit whatever the AI tells you, comes up with." He clarified, "our focus as a university is not to go deep into AI technologies, AI science, and so on, but to apply AI."

Dr Deborah MacLatchy, President of Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada, noted the extensive work her institution has done: "we've done a lot of work at Laurier of developing, you know, policies and principles around our use of AI." She also raised an environmental concern: "the amount of energy that it takes. Like if you're going to have these large AI computational activities going on, you know, how do we balance that in an era of where we should be thinking about climate change."

Professor Tan Tai Yong, President of the Singapore University of Social Sciences, acknowledged the immediate impact: "Generative AI became highly, highly impactful in late 2022... my colleagues were starting to write me email saying their students are employing it as a tool, so how are we going to adjust our curriculum and assessment to accommodate?" He emphasised, "I want to know your thought process" regarding student work, not just the output.

Professor Nic Smith, Vice-Chancellor of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, sees AI "on that cusp of both opportunity and challenge." He worried about embedding "biases and prejudices in an even more opaque system." He also raised a pedagogical concern: "if you can now replace that foundation with an AI... then your motivation to develop that foundation is going to be diminished."

6. The Opportunity and Challenge of genAI (continued)

"The challenge for us is to ensure that we are adapting our assessment so that we can identify the contribution that students are making... engaging much more with project work and changing that more frequently so that the model project is not available on the internet or for an AI algorithm to find."

Professor Neil Quigley, University of Waikato, New Zealand

"I've always felt that my slightly checkered journey through education has helped me to really relate to AI's potential to help diverse groups of learners — people who are struggling, people who are non-traditional. You know, I think this huge power that AI can bring to that, and obviously that's close to my heart."

Professor Rose Luckin, UCL, United Kingdom

"We'll be making best use of AI technologies to design the content, which can provide an engaging experience to the learners." **Dr Zia Ul-Qayyum, Executive Director of the Higher Education Commission in Pakistan.**

Professor Neil Quigley, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Waikato, New Zealand, "So the challenge for us is to ensure that we are adapting our assessment so that we can identify the contribution that students are making. And what that's going to mean is, you know, we simply can't rely on essays and on tests that students can do at home. But we're going to need to be engaging much more with project work and changing that more frequently so that the model project is not available on the internet or for an AI algorithm to find."



Host: Prof Cliff Allan

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6. The Opportunity and Challenge of genAI (continued)

Dr Maurits van Rooijen, Rector of the University of Europe, Germany, asserted that "students need to be really comfortable with AI. What does that mean? It means not only applying it and using it as a quick tool, but actually also understanding what the limitations are on AI and how to deal with AI." He advocated for "co-learning" between professors and students in this rapidly evolving field.

Professor Freddy Boey, President of City University of Hong Kong, highlighted the acceleration AI provides: "technology today has helped us to learn faster at all levels." He advocated for a "learning-centric" approach, stressing, "It's not good enough of professors to be good teachers. It must be that the students have learned well and sometimes without the professors help."

Professor Tod Laursen, Chancellor of the American University of Sharjah, UAE, acknowledged that AI "provides real challenges for our traditional ways of thinking about assessment in universities and learning. It's not going to go away though, so we're going to have to learn to deal with those challenges." He expressed a belief that "the way we do a lot of education will change, but I think a lot of the fundamental tenants that we hope to provide students... the goals won't necessarily change."

"We're going to have to learn to deal with those challenges"



Spotlight on: Authenticity

Unconstrained access to Large Language Models in learning environments has ignited a critical reassessment of academic integrity and traditional assessment (See recently: "A New Headache for Honest Students: Proving They Didn't Use A.I.", Hill, New York Times, 2025, and "Everyone Is Cheating Their Way Through College", Marche, NY Magazine, 2025). **It is clear that the challenge for institutions is not merely detection, but adapting pedagogy, culture, and infrastructure to support and prove authentic learning.** In 2025-2026, more leaders are pushing for a post-GPT shift from policing to learning.

6. The Opportunity and Challenge of genAI (continued)

Professor George Williams, Vice-Chancellor and President of Western Sydney University, Australia, sees AI as "less a threat than more an exciting opportunity." He stated, "my job is to prepare our students not just for the jobs of today, but jobs that don't even exist yet." He believes students must understand AI as "a tool that the most desirable students and the outside world will know how to do well with."

Dr Kyle Long, President of the American University in Dubai, UAE, characterised AI as "more of an era-defining shift." He stressed empowering faculty and teaching critical analysis: "We need to empower faculty. We need to help them to understand that, that they can use these tools to-to-to strengthen student learning."

Dr Marc Poulin, Acting President of Abu Dhabi School of Management, UAE, noted, "There was a lot of talk now of making a lot of policies... moving away more from policies and more principles and guidelines." He emphasised showing students "how AI also could produce very bad results. So if you don't learn the theory, how are you going to ever judge what's coming out?"

Dr Albert Chau, Vice-President Education at Hong Kong Baptist University, emphasised empowerment and ethics: "We empower our colleagues and students to use AI... It is not just about avoiding plagiarism. It is about how to use AI and other technologies to promote the human good." He outlined a core course for all students: "AI for Social Good."

Professor Nic Smith, Vice-Chancellor of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, talked about the book 'Co-Intelligence - Living and Working with AI', "Which is at one end quite a practical view of how AI could be changing our lives, and in another sense, much more a sort of philosophical question of what it means to be human. How do we, how are we going to evolve or coevolve? What's going to happen when we exceed what we think of as human intelligence in AI systems? And I suppose what it has ultimately reinforced, is that these questions are far less about the technology. They're certainly not about the computing or the mathematics. They're about the the underpinning, philosophy and humanity of who we are and what's important for us."



Theme 7. Finance and strategy

Financial management emerged as a recurring concern, mentioned by 22% of interviewees across the 12 months. Leaders - of institutions and in the sector - are grappling with a complex landscape, including fluctuating government funding, tuition freezes, and increasing operational costs - compounded by global socio-economic change and uncertainty. Leadership offered insight and posed questions, particularly to their peers, about diversifying revenue streams, resource allocation, and making difficult decisions. Overall sentiment is that there is a risk to 'balancing books' in the immediate term - that is, survival strategies - when it comes at the cost of long-term investment, including institutional sustainability and preserving quality, thoughtfully.

"There is a fundamental structural problem in the funding of teaching and research... That probably feels like a crisis in some institutions... finding the almost continuous deterioration in the kind of operating conditions and extraordinary strain, doing what needs to be done to balance budgets often at the expense of things that under other circumstances you would want to be able to preserve." **Vivienne Stern, Chief Executive Officer, Universities UK, United Kingdom**

Professor Nic Smith, Vice-Chancellor of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, noted the prevailing sentiment: "I think all Vice-Chancellors would say this, we have a funding crunch."

Dr Deborah MacLatchy, President of Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada, highlighted the pressure points: "as we're looking now at the cost structures of universities and challenges with tuition freezes and government grant freezes and the rest of it, and trying now to find the balance between the great educational experience... with the duty of care supports that we have so that students can be successful."

Professor George Williams, Vice-Chancellor and President of Western Sydney University, Australia, "Sadly many of the surprises have been about government policy... and financially we're in a tough position at the moment... And literally, at my end, it's those shocks mean making choices between employment and food services. It's really difficult."

Dr Chuck Welch, President of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, United States, "I read back-to-back the biographies of Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart, and Jeff Bezos. And, you know, same industry, but very different approaches. But the one thing I found was they wanted to do something differently than anyone else had done. And so I would encourage people to do that and read especially those people that are willing to talk about, hey, here's where I messed up, here's what I didn't do, here's what I wish I could have done, because I think there's lessons to be learned for all of us, regardless of our age, or regardless of our position, or where we've made it in our careers."

7. Finance and strategy

“The balance between the public contribution and the private contribution to higher education is wrong. It’s wrong in Scotland, where it’s too far towards the public contribution, and it’s wrong in England where it’s too far towards the private contribution. There must be somewhere in the middle.”

“I think the challenges in the UK are obviously at one very basic level that the unit of resource for both teaching and research has fallen away from what it should be. We’ve not had the return on the tuition fee or on research funding which we actually need to carry out those activities properly.” The business model of universities across the UK that had probably seemed relatively intact about 8 or 10 years ago has really started to fall over.” - **Professor Dame Sally Mapstone, University of St Andrews, United Kingdom.**



Spotlight on: Evidence-based technology investment

In an era defined by funding changes and constraints, technology investment must shift from a 'wait and see' strategy or a 'trend based' approach - and must be able to **defend learning gain**. This requires HE leaders to justify expenditures with clear returns on investment and adopt systems that are evidence-based and align with the primary teaching and learning mission.

7. Finance and strategy

Dr Zia Ul-Qayyum, Executive Director of the Higher Education Commission in Pakistan,

acknowledged the financial constraints in his country's context: "this is more important when we are actually financially constrained as well." He aims for "improving the state of affairs in the educational sector" by attracting investment.

Dr Alison Morrison-Shetlar, President of the University of Lynchburg, United States,

provided a detailed account of difficult restructuring: "70% of our students, undergraduate students, were in eight majors, and 95% of our students were in 21 majors, and we had 51 majors... 25% of our faculty were teaching fewer than 5% of students. That's just not a sustainable financial model." This led to the elimination of programs and positions, yielding "about \$4.9 million back to invest."

Dr Marc Poulin, Acting President of Abu Dhabi School of Management, UAE,

noted the challenge in a tuition-dependent system: "most universities globally will be funded in a big part by the government or in our case, even though we're 100% owned by the Chamber of Commerce, we do function as a totally private institution, 100% funded by student tuition." He highlighted that "the costs is making it tough."



Theme 8. The Journey to - and through - Leadership

For this year's guests, the path to leadership looks unconventional but grounded in service and personal values. Many were academics first - with a recurring narrative of unexpectedly shifting into administration after identifying systemic problems they felt compelled to solve. Frequently, leaders in their interviews described that effective university leadership is modelled on good teaching: that is - about enabling and coaching, not commanding. 'Curiosity' is a recurring theme - as is the 'humility' to understand complex issues and to listen to faculty, staff, and students. Most stress that the role requires courage and resilience to use their position to amplify positive impact on a greater number of lives.

"The so-called leaders just trying to 'reimagine' education in their office is not going to work. What my colleagues and I want to do is co-create together with students and partners. I'm the first to admit I don't know everything. So I think the key is to go out with a humble heart, talk to people, learn from them, and co-design, co-create a process."

Professor Lily Kong, Singapore Management University, Singapore

"My failures sometimes made me a better educator. If you're not failing, you're not pushing boundaries. As educators, we need to push the boundaries and encourage our students and colleagues to do the same. Any day that passes without learning something new is not only a wasted day but a move backward." **Professor Imad Hoballah, American University of Ras Al Khaimah, UAE**

Professor Damon Salesa, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand:

"Curiosity is a powerful leadership act... amongst great leaders, there's always an act to be curious — to be curious about other people, the way other people see it, about the way people see you, about the way they see a problem, about what they think is important. Curiosity is always a kind of act that's bigger than the self. It helps reflect on where you are, it keeps you honest and it also keeps you humble, which I think are two qualities that I aspire to retain as a leader."



Theme 8. The Journey to and through Leadership

Professor Diana Laurillard, UCL, United Kingdom:

“Leadership in education must be humble enough to listen to the evidence. Too often change is imposed from above without understanding what works on the ground. True leadership is collaborative; it’s about enabling others to do their best work and learn from failure.”

Professor Yousef Haik, University of Sharjah, UAE:

“I believe in leading by example. You have to show people that excellence is not just expected, it’s practiced. My role is to empower — to remove obstacles so my colleagues and students can innovate and succeed. That’s what real leadership means to me.”

Professor Freddy Boey, City University of Hong Kong:

“I think it’s important for universities not just to lead, but to have a way to bring up young leadership. Universities are very long-term creatures... there must be a way to inspire great scientists to also want to be great leaders. You become a great academic leader of a university, you really can impact a lot more people and make the best of society.”

Professor Grant Edwards, Lincoln University, New Zealand:

“A lot of it is about crafting the strategy of essentially how you want to play, what your values are, and how you want to interact as individuals to come together. The key part in the leadership journey is the relationship of building teams.”

Ted Mitchell, American Council on Education (ACE), United States:

“To sit at the right hand of a sitting president — Don Kennedy was the President at Stanford — and one of my great friends and great mentors. I wouldn’t be where I am but for Don’s mentorship and support... Then I left Stanford to go to UCLA as Dean of Education. The Chancellor said the faculty were fine researchers, but they really weren’t having any impact on the schools of Los Angeles. He said, ‘If you’re up for taking that challenge, I’m ready to let you loose.’ That was a great opportunity to take cutting-edge research and put it into practice.”



Theme 8. The Journey to and through Leadership

Dr Alison Morrison-Scheutz, University of Lynchburg, United States

“My goal in life is to mentor as many people as I can, particularly young women, to do the kinds of things that I've done and be supported to be able to do it.”

Dr Ronald Rochon, California State University Fullerton, United States:

“Leadership requires that you stand firm in your values, even when political winds shift. You have to be willing to listen, to adapt, but also to protect what education truly represents — hope, transformation, and opportunity. The title doesn't make you a leader; your actions do.”

Professor Grant Robertson, University of Otago, New Zealand:

“I never thought I would get this job because I'm not a lifetime academic... I always felt very strongly about the importance of this place... this is very much my home. There's a word in Maori culture, Tūrangawaewae, which literally means 'a place to stand'.”

Professor Adeeba Kamarulzaman, Monash University, Malaysia:

“Leadership is about being grounded in purpose — to serve, to build, and to lift others as you go along.”

Dr Wafa Almansoori, American University of Bahrain, Bahrain: “For me, leadership is about mentorship and creating a safe space where others can thrive. In our region, we need to show young women that leadership isn't about hierarchy, it's about collaboration, empathy, and building confidence in others to take their own steps forward.”

**Dr Stacy Young, Manchester University, United States:**

“You have to lead with authenticity. The people around you can sense very quickly if you're performing rather than serving. I think courage and humility have to exist in balance — courage to make decisions, and humility to know when you're wrong and to change course.”

*Theme 8. The Journey to and through Leadership***Dr Sudhindra Shamanna, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Dubai:**

“Leadership in academia is about vision and consistency. It’s not about authority — it’s about building trust, inspiring teams, and having the patience to guide transformation over time. You must always be ready to learn from your people.”

Dr Abtar Kaur, Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation, Malaysia:


“As a woman in higher education leadership, I’ve learned that courage comes from purpose. You have to keep your values at the centre of what you do, because challenges and resistance will always be there. Mentoring others is essential — it’s how we create continuity.”

Professor Dato Elizabeth Lee Fuh Yen, Sunway Education Group, Malaysia:

“It’s important for leaders to know why they do what they do. You can’t just react to circumstances — you have to have a clear sense of purpose and conviction. At the same time, you must care deeply for the people you lead, because education is a people enterprise.”

Professor Dame Heather McGregor, Heriot-Watt University Dubai, UAE:

“Authentic leadership means you never ask anyone to do something you wouldn’t do yourself. You have to be clear on your purpose, consistent in your behaviour, and courageous when it’s unpopular. And you must make time to mentor others — that’s the only way leadership endures.”



Spotlight on: Strategy and Change Management

Change management in higher education has a positive history of being **learning-led**, not trend-driven. In other words a ‘hurry, slowly’ approach. In 2026, institutional strategy must be courageous enough to drive change and humble enough to listen to the needs of educators and students - what is really wanted out of infrastructure, and the degree experience? Overwhelmingly, students want learning, peer connection, and the self-confidence to grow “life chances”. HE leaders are moving back to an evidence-based, **learning-based approach**, ensuring any new initiatives - including generative AI - can prove learning, protect degree validity, and demonstrate a clear return on investment.

Explore next: Recurring themes

Leaders identified these cross-cutting areas as having profound, long-term implications for the structure and mission of higher education, necessitating continued exploration beyond 2025.

The Next Generation of Leadership: This addresses the increasing difficulty of senior roles, advocating for diversification of the presidency and the establishment of robust support structures for leaders to manage complexity and high turnover.

Social Mobility and Equity: This remains a central moral mission, focused on using education to create a fairer and more just society by addressing systemic inequalities in access and opportunity.

Globalisation and Internationalisation: Beyond student recruitment, this involves preparing students for global citizenship, understanding challenges that "transcend geographical boundaries," and ensuring ethical international partnerships.

Dr Chuck Welch, President of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, United States, recognised the increasing difficulty of presidential roles and advocated for **"diversification of the presidency, both in individual's backgrounds, and personalities, and career experiences."** "We always talk about support systems for students, and they're critically important. I needed them as a first-generation student, but we've got to have those same support structures for our presidents and chancellors too."

"We always talk about support systems for students, and they're critically important. I needed them as a first-generation student, but we've got to have those same support structures for our presidents and chancellors too."

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Thank you to all the educators, staff, and leaders across the sector, with the bravery to reimagine, advocate, and act to progress a stronger future for higher education.



After five years and 150 episodes, we extend our thanks to all those who took the time to be interviewed and 'reimagine' higher education. Stay tuned for more insightful conversations with higher ed leaders coming in 2026.

Also with great appreciation to our anchor, Professor Judyth Sachs, and our Global Academic Advisory Board for your due diligence and passion for change in higher education.



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