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LIGHTS - Leadership

The making of the ABC Framework and what it reveals about AI adoption in universities

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Abstract

Universities are integrating AI faster than they are governing it or rethinking what they teach. Examining 44 contributions from 14 countries at ESCP's first AI in Higher Education Summit, one clear pattern emerges: contributions are strongest on deployment, weaker on governance, and weaker still on redesigning teaching around human judgment. That gap is the practical problem this paper names. It also appears in checks of AI-in-higher-education submissions from five independent venues, 2023 to 2025. The ABC Framework gives leaders a way to close it through three simultaneous obligations: be Accountable for AI as a governed system, Bold in expanding capability through disciplined experimentation, and Creative in rethinking teaching and academic work. The practical move for a leader is to identify where deployment has outpaced written risk rules and redesigned teaching, then direct resources and authority to fulfilling unmet obligations rather than to the next isolated pilot.

Keywords: ABC Framework, AI governance, higher education, institutional readiness, AI adoption

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The problem leaders actually face

A business school deployed an AI grading assistant to 650 students. A research university now runs its own generative AI platform for 90,000 learners. A third university led with a governance and intellectual-property framework rather than a deployment. Same question, three doors. AI is settled enough to act on. The institutional question is not.

I created the ABC Framework, inspired by ESCP Business School's mission of creating accountable, bold, and creative leaders, to organize the parallel sessions of the 2026 AI in Higher Education Summit around its three obligations. Louis-David Benyayer and I then applied it to introduce the proceedings (Benyayer & Tascioglu, 2026). This impact paper introduces the framework and provides the sole-authored evidence behind it. The 44 session papers, from 14 countries and published in the summit proceedings (Benyayer, 2026), point to a simpler problem: universities are moving at very different speeds on three things they need to do together. Most describe something deployed. Fewer present the governance that should underpin it. Fewer still rethink teaching so that AI does not quietly hollow out what a degree is supposed to certify. Capability is running ahead of governance, and governance is running ahead of pedagogy. I call this pattern the maturity inversion: work on using AI is further along than work on governing it, and governing it is further along than rethinking what education is for. The split is roughly even by stage, about a third deployed, a third proposing governance, and a third still framing the questions. But the maturity is lopsided: most deployment work is already live, while most governance work is still a proposal on paper. This is a snapshot of the contributions, not a timeline for any single institution, and it is the one finding that a busy leader should remember.

This matters beyond any single campus. AI is a general-purpose technology, a category economists have studied for decades: an innovation that reshapes many parts of an organization at once (Bresnahan & Trajtenberg, 1995). For a university, those parts are operations, governance, and teaching. Long-standing research on socio-technical systems explains the risk of moving them at different speeds. When institutions redesign one layer and neglect the others, the whole system becomes fragile (Pasmore et al., 1982). A university that deploys fast while its governance and its teaching lag is not simply uneven. It is building predictable fragility into its own operations.

The ABC Framework in plain terms

ABC names three obligations a university must hold at the same time. The summit's three tracks drew their names from ESCP's mission to educate accountable, bold, and creative leaders, and the framework keeps those words because they travel well.

- **Accountable** is AI as a governed system, covering oversight, risk classification, data protection, and fairness. The question it forces is who owns the risk, and who answers when an AI-assisted decision goes wrong.
- **Bold** is capability expansion through disciplined experimentation, the willingness to deploy real tools to real users and learn from them rather than waiting for certainty that never comes. The question is where the institution is learning from real deployment instead of waiting.

- **Creative** is redesigning teaching and academic work around human judgment. The question is what students and faculty must still be able to judge and do once AI can perform many of the tasks a degree used to certify.

ABC complements the external rules that govern AI, such as the UNESCO guidance for generative AI in education (UNESCO, 2023), the OECD AI principles (OECD, 2024), and the EU AI Act (European Parliament and Council, 2024). Those documents set legal and policy expectations. ABC asks a different question: what kind of university do we want to become? Regulation covers much of the Accountable obligation, but it says far less about the Creative one, how teaching and academic work should change. These three obligations are not a menu or a checklist of independent workstreams, because a decision in one pillar changes the conditions under which the other two can succeed. A university that is Bold without being Accountable invites regulatory and reputational failure. One that is Accountable without being Bold produces compliance theater and never learns. One that is Bold and Accountable but not Creative automates the old work without asking whether the work still makes sense. The three are mutually reinforcing, which is why the situation of an institution strong on one and weak on the others is worrisome.

What the evidence shows

Read plainly, the 44 contributions can be sorted into three stages of maturity: work that is deployed, work that proposes governance, and work that is still framing the questions. They can be divided into roughly equal thirds, but they do not line up behind the same obligation (Figure 1). Deployment concentrates on capability work. Governance shows up mostly as frameworks and models that have not been put into practice. Teaching shows up mostly as open questions. Some teaching projects are already live, but many use AI before institutions have decided what teaching and assessment should still require from people. The clearest version of the gap is in the governance work itself. Among the contributions focused on institutional governance, an actual deployment is the rare exception, and most propose frameworks they have not yet put into practice. Among the contributions built around tool deployment, the reverse holds, and almost all are live. In this corpus, experimentation is running ahead of governance. The three are obligations to meet at once, not stages to move through in sequence, and Figure 1 shows how far the work on each has actually gotten: deployment is Bold and mostly live, governance Accountable and mostly still proposed, teaching Creative and still framing the questions. This maturity coding applies to the work each contribution describes, not to its institution as a whole.

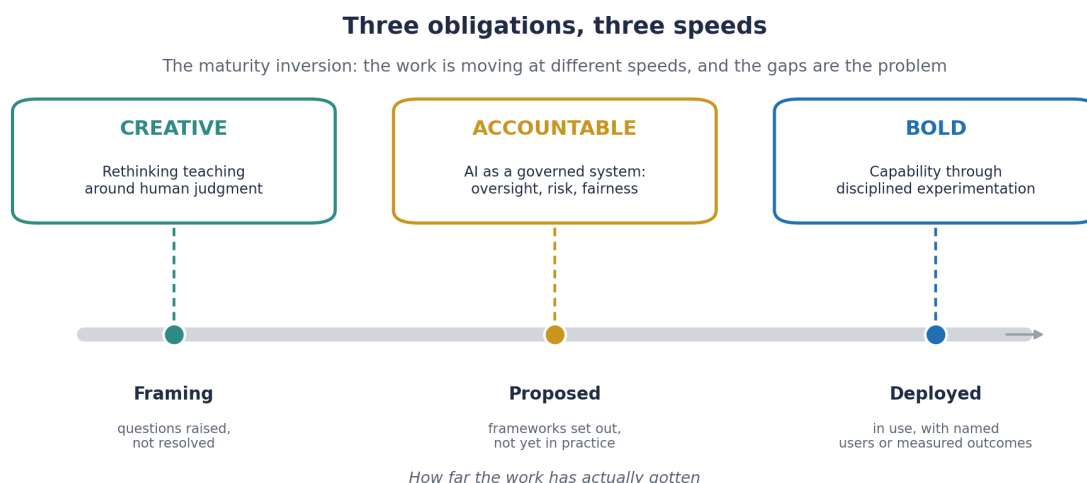
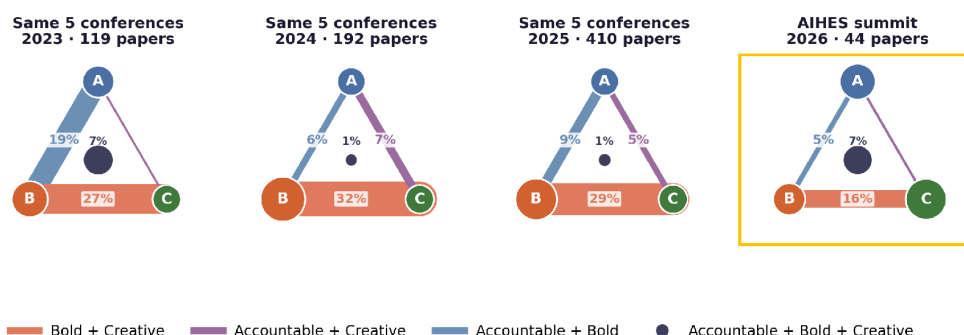


Figure 1. Maturity of the work on each obligation.

To test whether the pattern was an artifact of how I built the summit, I collected AI-in-higher-education submissions from five open conferences that recur across 2023 to 2025, at the same venues every year (EUNIS, ASCILITE, EDEN, EC-TEL, and AIED). I thus collected just over 700 contributions in all, none organized around ABC, and divided them into the three obligations, weighting each venue equally so that no single large venue drives the result. The same shortfall appeared each year: deployment was the most common of the three obligations and governance trailed it, the obligation-level echo of the summit's maturity gap. Because five conferences I did not organize reproduce it, the recurrence is not a quirk of one summit, it is what leaders should plan around.

The obligations also do not separate cleanly, and Figure 2 shows this as connections rather than tracks: each node is sized by the work carrying that obligation alone, an edge marks the submissions that carry two at once, and the center dot those that carry all three. Across every year and at the ESCP summit, the obligations overlap mainly through Creative, tied most strongly to Bold where AI is deployed in teaching and more lightly to Accountable where the live question is assessment integrity, so the interdependence the framework names is visible in the work itself, not imposed by the coding. One reading carries the most weight. The center, the work that holds all three obligations at once, is small in every panel, at most about one contribution in thirteen, and falls to near zero in the best-populated 2024 and 2025 years. The panels show substantial standalone and two-obligation work, but very little that carries all three at once. The field is applying AI in separate compartments rather than joining deployment, governance, and teaching into one practice. The gap is not that no one governs, it is that almost no one governs while building and teaching at the same time.



Node = share carrying that obligation alone; edge = share carrying two; centre dot = share carrying all three. Five open conferences, the same each year, weighted equally; AIED title-coded, the others abstract-coded; 2023 thin. Method and caveats in the text.

Figure 2. Overlap among the three obligations, by year and at the AIHES summit.

How the analysis was done

The method followed a simple order. Each contribution was first coded against 22 themes without using the summit's track labels or the words Accountable, Bold, and Creative. Only then were the resulting groups compared with the three ABC obligations. This guards against finding ABC simply because the coding set out to look for it. Had the analysis started from ABC and worked backward, the result would say more about how I built the summit than about the field.

Two AI classifiers, prompted separately, agreed on 82% of the maturity labels (Cohen's kappa 0.73). Separately prompted passes checked the obligation mapping, and two external checks follow. First, for the openly abstracted AIED and EAAI conference papers, three differently prompted classifiers ran a lighter, abstract-level check of the governance gap and agreed well above chance but short of a firm threshold (Krippendorff's alpha of 0.56).

Second, Figure 2 uses the same five open conferences in every year from 2023 to 2025, none organized around ABC. I coded their AI-in-higher-education submissions into the three obligations and weighted the five venues equally, so one large venue could not drive the percentages. Four are coded at abstract level; AIED enters at title level because most of its proceedings are gated, so it is read as corroboration rather than precise measurement. ASCILITE and EC-TEL, never organized around AI, are the cleanest comparators; EDEN and AIED ran AI-themed or AI-native editions, and the 2023 venues are thin, which equal weighting magnifies, so I read the panel for the recurring structure rather than a measured trend. Within those limits the standalone Creative share rises across the better-populated 2024 and 2025 panels as generative AI made teaching and assessment redesign urgent, while the work integrating all three obligations stays near zero. Coverage still leans on what these venues index, so it is a sample rather than a census. This reading is exploratory, since contributions share few themes pairwise, so I treat the framework as an analytical lens grounded in theory rather than a hypothesis this corpus proves. The full detail, codebook, and robustness checks sit in a separate methods paper in preparation, available from the author.

What this means and where to act first

With those caveats stated, the pattern still offers practical lessons beyond university leadership. It asks something different of each reader, and none of these moves can wait, even though the findings will not transfer identically to every setting.

University leaders should focus resources and authority on the obligations that are falling behind, not on the next isolated pilot. Deployment often spreads on its own through local experiments. Governance and teaching redesign do not. Faculty should treat assessment redesign as the job now rather than police student AI use later. Students should ask what forms of human judgment their program develops and certifies, and expect an honest answer. Policymakers and accreditation bodies should look at how AI is actually governed in practice, not only at published principles. Oversight will land on institutions that deployed faster than they governed, so clear standards and support will help more than penalties. Employers and any organization adopting AI should read the university case as an early signal: where capability runs ahead of governance and workforce redesign, the framework expects strain to surface gradually rather than all at once.

Knowing what to do is not the same as knowing what to fund first. Priorities turn on two things a leader can judge quickly: how urgent the risk is, and how much the field already knows about solving it. The map below sequences work on the obligations, a practical starting point, not a validated model.

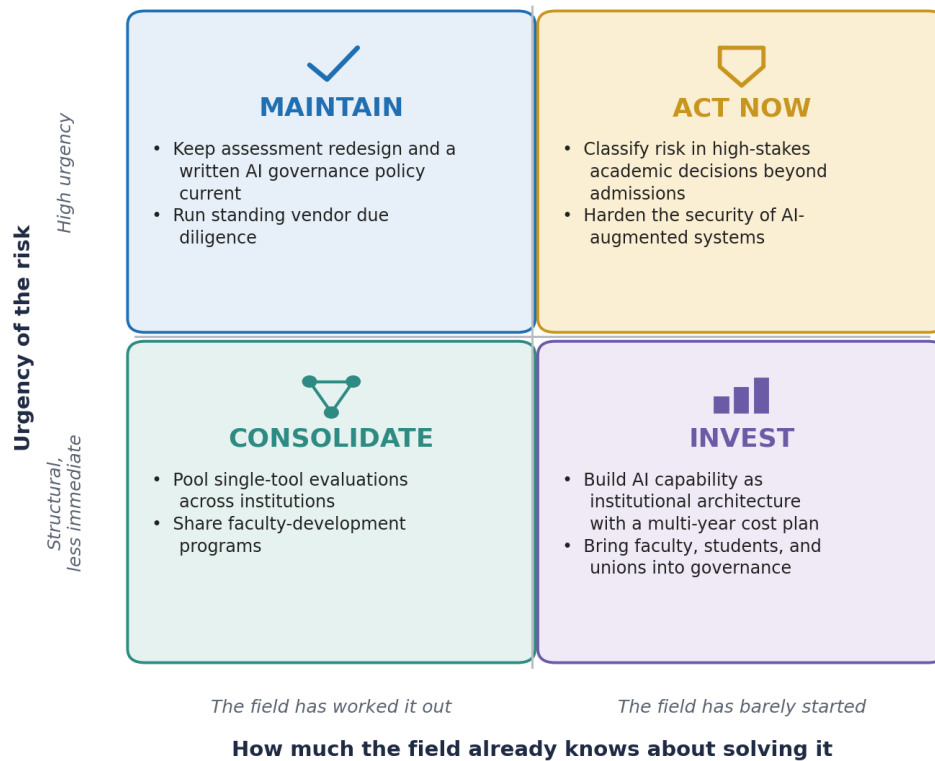


Figure 3. A priority map for university leaders.

The two act-now items combine low corpus coverage with high potential institutional harm, judged by the regulatory and operational consequences of getting them wrong. Risk classification beyond admissions covers financial aid, academic standing, dismissal, and plagiarism adjudication, decisions that can carry consequences comparable in seriousness to the admissions cases everyone already worries about. Security of AI-augmented systems covers data residency, identity and access management, and the resilience of tools that now sit inside core operations. Institutions with limited resources should act in sequence. Secure the two act-now items first, the high-stakes decisions and the core systems. Reuse existing governance templates and shared tool evaluations, then build longer-term capability as budgets allow.

Consider three moves drawn from what those with the strongest contributions actually did. To become more Accountable, a university set out its governance and intellectual-property rules as a framework ahead of deployment, so the policy could shape the tool rather than chase it. To be Bold without being reckless, a research university built its own platform for tens of thousands of learners and instrumented it to measure outcomes, so experimentation produced evidence. To be Creative, a teaching team redesigned assessment around the judgment AI cannot supply, so the tool raised the bar on student thinking instead of replacing it. None of these moves is enough on its own. The platform needs governance, the governance needs live deployment to learn from, and both need an honest answer to what students should still think and do. Each move is reproducible by an institution willing to fulfill the three obligations together.

Limits

The analysis has six main limits. The corpus is a single summit with contributors who chose to take part, so it over-represents management schools and European and North American institutions, and it underrepresents much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The framework also takes AI adoption as a starting point and does not weigh whether some uses should be

resisted rather than governed, a question critical scholarship continues to press (Selwyn, 2024). As the framework's author, I brought knowledge of ABC to the coding, so the mapping is a content-level judgment rather than a blind test. The analysis is a snapshot, not a trend, and the speed differences across the contributions are not yet a measured sequence over time. The grouping is exploratory, for the reasons cited in the detail of the analysis. The evidence supports the framework but does not prove it. I will pre-register the analysis of the 2027 AI in Higher Education Summit at the same venue, so the framework can fail if the pattern does not hold and, by repeating the measurement year over year, can begin to show whether the governance gap is closing. The maturity inversion is thus less a verdict than a diagnostic tool: a way to read where a field stands at a given moment, which only repeated measurement on the same venue can turn into a claim about movement. It would weaken if the gap disappears in independent corpora. ABC would also lose value if work organized without its labels does not still fall around the same three obligations.

Conclusion

On AI tools, the institutions in this corpus are already operating. On AI governance, they are still mostly drafting. On teaching, the contributions show the least movement of the three, mostly open questions rather than practice. Whether that redesign is genuinely scarce or simply hidden, kept from view by shadow AI use, the unsanctioned tools students and faculty already rely on, and the caution that weak governance breeds, is itself a question worth investigating. We have put forward principles for a form of governance that is durable, contestable, and respectful of rights, but not yet the evidence that anyone is living by them. So the Monday-morning question for a university ex-com is plain: which high-stakes uses of AI still have no named owner and no written risk policy, and who will carry them through academic governance before another year sets today's improvisation in stone? Governance shapes what gets deployed. Deployment reshapes what students need to learn. Teaching decides what a degree will still mean. A university that holds only one of these holds none of them for long, and the work now is to be accountable, bold, and creative at the same time, and at the same speed.

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