



Accelerating academia: keeping pace in a rapidly changing world

Global survey of academic leaders provides institutions with a transformation roadmap to stay ahead through societal, economic and geopolitical headwinds.

Universities play a critical role in society and contribute to the shaping of modern life and economies. They advance knowledge, foster innovation and address global challenges such as climate change and sustainable development.

Academia has rarely faced a more challenging time. Conventional funding streams and sources of income for universities are under threat. [Enrolment in higher education in many places is down](#). Geopolitical disruption and national immigration policies are curbing the international movement of students. Meanwhile, increasing public scrutiny on the value academia delivers is putting pressure on it.

The imperative for institutions to respond and adapt is clear but the complex and often interdependent nature of these issues means that there is no singular solution. Instead, institutions must address these challenges holistically, looking across their organizations at opportunities for both incremental performance gains and more transformative change.

“Funders want more bang for their buck, and importantly our students, more attuned than ever before to the socioeconomic and environmental crises facing our nations, expect much more from our institutions. And rightly so,” writes [Anton Muscatelli](#), Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Glasgow, UK.

To help map out this transformation, Elsevier surveyed 450 academic leaders from around the world to understand where focus is most important. Questions explored objectives relating to strategy, funding models, partnerships, operations and institutional reputation — to reveal the institutional priorities of academic leaders.

For Jingwen Mu, Director of Institutional Research and Strategic Planning at Hong Kong Baptist University, one focus is local engagement.

“A common challenge that we share with the university



“Funders want more bang for their buck, and importantly our students, more attuned than ever before to the socioeconomic and environmental crises facing our nations, expect much more from our institutions. And rightly so.”

Anton Muscatelli, FRSE, ACSS

Principal and Vice-Chancellor at University of Glasgow
[Excerpted from Not Alone](#)

community all over the world is having an eye on our global impact, but in a way that we try to anchor locally in addressing local issues,” Mu says. “We have different contexts and different issues that we all have to contribute to in our own way.”

The survey showed how priorities ranged from student outcomes — from retention and engagement to graduation rate — to the use of AI.

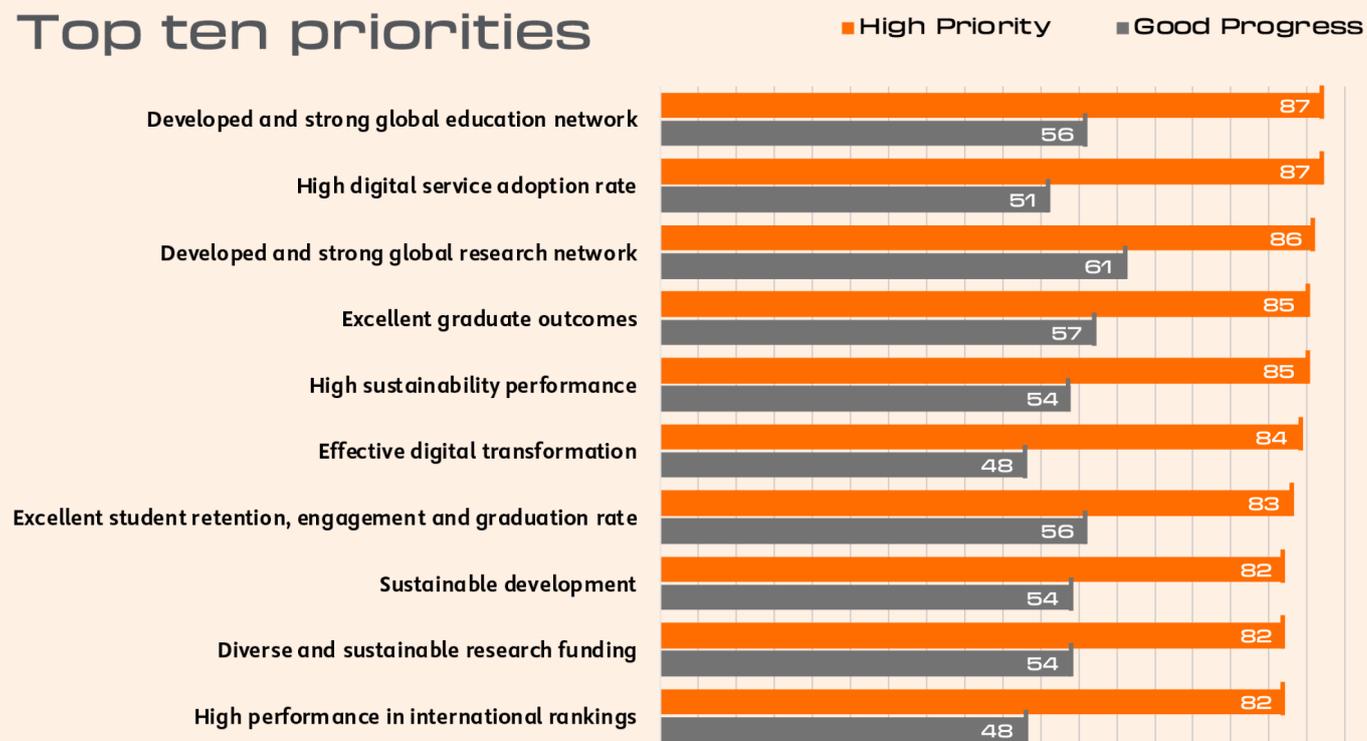
In parallel, academic leaders rated the progress they believed their institution is making against each priority, revealing where the opportunity for performance gains is greatest. To augment this picture further, each priority was scored based on their view of its transformational potential, if fully realized.

Academic leaders' current priorities

The survey results showed the diverse community of academia has some common goals. Some 87% identified the need to develop a strong global education network as a high priority.

And the same number highlighted the importance of high adoption rates of digital services. Global networks to support research, excellent graduate outcomes and sustainable performance were named as priorities by a large majority of respondents. So was effective digital transformation and excellent student retention, engagement and graduation rates. High performance in international rankings was another prominent goal, as well as the need for institutions to develop diverse and sustainable sources of research funding.

Top ten priorities



Question: Please rate these objectives based on the level of importance they currently hold in your institution and the amount of progress your organization has made to date.

In many cases, reported progress showed room for improvement. The survey revealed geographical differences in how well academic institutions are making the desired connections, for example. While 66% of those in Europe reported good progress in developing strong global education networks, just 50% could say the same in the Asia Pacific region, and 49% in North America. And while 84% of academic leaders globally say that effective digital transformation is a top priority for their institution, only 48% report good progress.

Whilst demographic and firmographic factors are at play, a unifying theme is the focus on building more dynamic and resilient organizations — along three dominant routes.

The first is digital transformation. Institutions are focused on leveraging technology to streamline operations and administration, working to improve and automate existing analog workflows and systems.

They are also working out how best to leverage AI — arguably representing the largest paradigm shift in education, research and administrative operations for decades. Only 34% of leaders say that their institutions have made good progress on effective and responsible integration and adoption of generative AI, and only 44% see high transformational potential in it, with just 66% seeing it as a high priority. The reasons for these responses are diverse but the combination of resource constraints, knowledge gaps about practical applications, institutional inertia, and regulatory uncertainty make it challenging for academic leaders to develop a definitive approach quickly. Compounding this are lingering concerns about maintaining traditional academic values and integrity.

The second is global networks. Institutions view strong partnerships with similar organizations around the world, and connections with government and industry, as essential to remain competitive, financially healthy and produce impact.

In both research and education, networks enable them to address cross-border challenges and unlock scalable growth. Forging such networks is important even for institutions in countries who are world-leaders in research and education. For example, 93% of university leaders in the US ranked global research networks a high priority compared with 84% of non-US universities.

The third is sustainable practices, which necessarily recognizes the relationship between environmental and financial sustainability. Long-term resilience is a vital foundation for everything else that an institution aims to achieve, and sustainability is becoming a central agenda item for institutions worldwide. A massive 96% of academic leaders in Europe consider high sustainability performance to be a top priority, compared with 90% and 73% in North America and Asia Pacific, respectively.



of academic leaders surveyed say effective digital transformation is a top performance priority.



of academic leaders surveyed view developing robust global education networks as high-priority, with 86% prioritizing research networks.



of academic leaders surveyed identify high sustainability performance as a priority.

These three overarching priorities are interdependent as well as each being important in its own right. Financial sustainability allows progress on digital transformation and the development of global networks. Such partnerships rely on new digital tools and can help diversify revenue. In turn, better management of resources using the best software and hardware saves money.

Focusing on these priorities and understanding their transformational potential can help universities and other institutions secure their future. And many in the field argue that such a shift is both achievable and necessary.

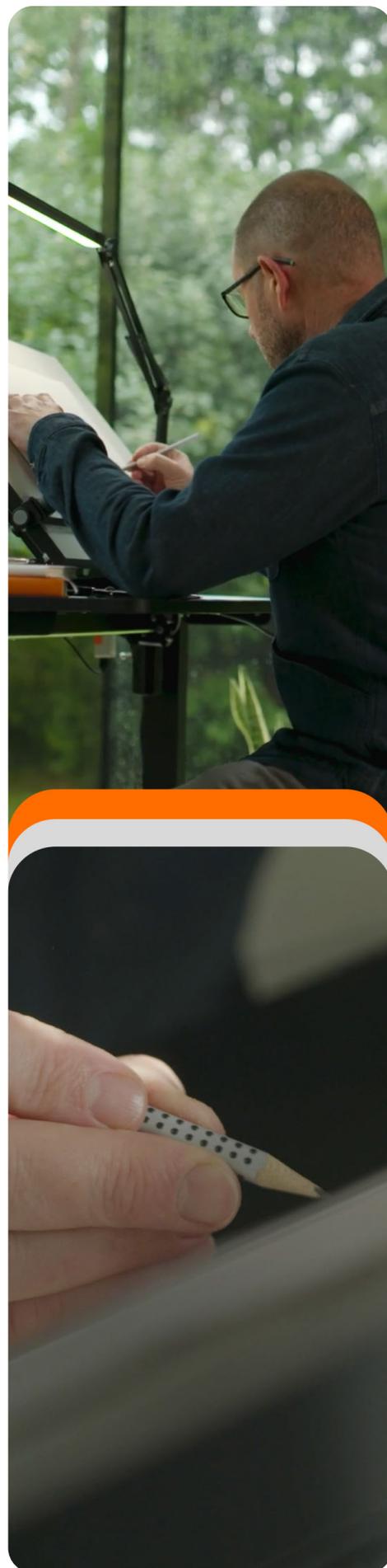
“It’s a myth that academia doesn’t change. Academic institutions have survived for 1000 years, in some cases. And they didn’t do that by staying the same,” says Rafael Bras, former Provost of Georgia Institute of Technology, USA. “Sometimes, it just takes a jolt for them to wake up, and we may be going through one of those periods now.”

High performance - by design

Research like this that contrasts the priorities of academic leaders with levels of progress can cause a jolt. Or a jump start. But it can also be abstract and difficult to appreciate the complexity and interdependence of the issues that institutions face. So, to accompany the data and the analysis, we turned to an analogy that helps visualize their systemic nature: automotive design.

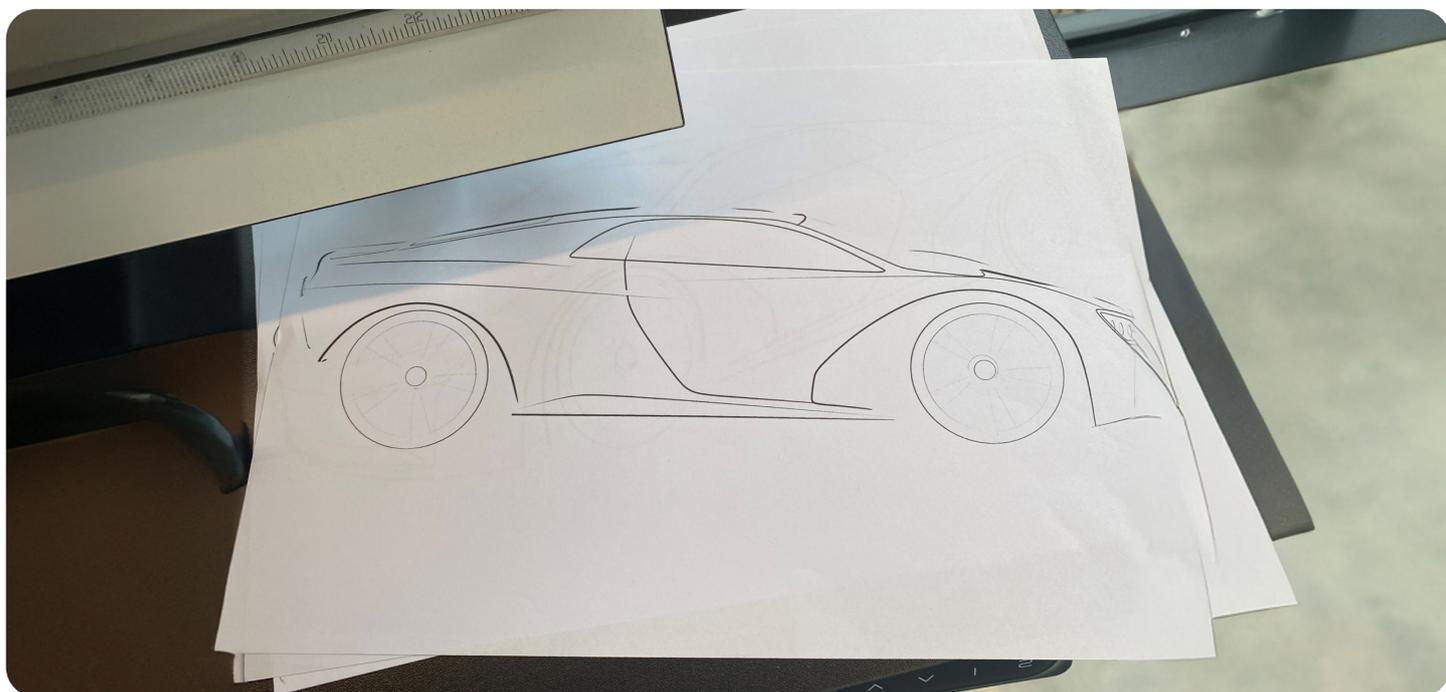
By conceptualizing academia through this lens — as a complex system of interdependent components — we hope that it becomes possible to understand the issues more contextually. Cars, like universities, face an increasingly competitive and changing environment. In response, such systems must continue to transform and optimize to maintain high performance, building their capabilities and capacity, and drawing on the latest technological advances to gain efficiencies.

Examining these priorities and levels of progress makes it possible to engineer a vivid picture of academia in 2024, as reported by academic leaders. Academia Presente, our automotive interpretation, demonstrably has the power and capacity for performance but equally highlights a wealth of opportunities for transformation.



Academic leaders, for example, identified the need to diversify their income as a top priority, recognizing the pressure to reduce their reliance on volatile funding streams. Just as the need to balance performance standards with environmental factors has driven the innovation of hybrid fuel systems in cars, institutions must look at a blend of funding sources that protect current interests whilst safeguarding the future.

From the need for stronger and more robust global education and research networks to effective digital transformation, Academia Presente visualizes where academic leaders see the opportunities to evolve and futureproof performance.



However, seeing the opportunities and realizing them is not the same thing. Drawing on the views of academic leaders about which objectives hold the most transformational potential, we have improved upon Academia Presente to give a compelling vision of the future.

Called Academia Futura, this concept car represents an academic institution at peak performance — one that flourishes when achieving excellence across all top priorities. It reveals how technology, sustainability and global networks can be leveraged and work together to overcome an ever-evolving terrain and move forward with pace and purpose. In the dynamic world of academia, high performance should never stop transforming. Approaching the challenges with this mindset can be transformative. Imagine the velocity, universality and potential of a sector reinvigorated by big thinking. Steering the way around the identified obstacles to a world-class solution for the future and beyond.

**Discover the future of academic performance at
elsevier.io/transformation**

Discover the future of academic performance



Elsevier offices

ASIA AND AUSTRALIA

Tel: + 65 6349 0222

JAPAN

Tel: + 81 3 5561 5034

KOREA AND TAIWAN

Tel: +82 2 6714 3000

EUROPE, MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA

Tel: +31 20 485 3767

NORTH AMERICA, CENTRAL AMERICA AND CANADA

Tel: +1 888 615 4500

SOUTH AMERICA

Tel: +55 21 3970 9300

