



Safeguarding Progress: Digital Transformation in Higher Education

Higher education institutions are taking meaningful steps toward digital transformation, supported by strong budgets and motivated by the imperative to adapt.

Yet with a diverse landscape of legacy systems and evolving technologies, digital progress comes with risks. Education leaders must balance innovation with safeguarding data and vital infrastructure.

This report explores findings from a recent survey—conducted by Windstream Enterprise and Industry Dive—of 139 leaders across public and private higher education and technical schools. These insights will help guide education decision-makers as they develop strategies and systems for the next phase of digital transformation.

Executive takeaways

Here's what you'll learn from this survey report:

- 1 The most urgent digital transformation initiatives according to education executives.
- 2 Two barriers most likely to impact their innovation and progress.
- 3 Why Secure Access Service Edge (SASE) is a vital enabler of digital innovation.
- 4 How technology vendor preferences diverge in the education environment.

Setting budgets that reflect holistic goals

Higher education leaders understand that digital transformation impacts every facet of their ecosystem. A substantial 46% of education executives believe that digital transformation initiatives are crucial for their organization’s success in the coming year.

Financial planning aligns with this sentiment, with 40% anticipating increased budgets for related initiatives in the next two years. This trajectory is unlikely to change, as their capital expenditure budgets are typically set years in advance.

Higher education decision-makers believe that failing to reach their digital transformation goals would have a far-reaching impact:



Prioritizing secure technology adoption

A clear consensus emerged among respondents around the importance of improving personalized learning. Notably, learning management systems (LMS) and student information systems (SIS) are cited as the two platforms most essential to the organization.

However, respondents recognize that achieving digital goals requires more than technology platforms. There’s a clear connection between tool adoption, interoperability and data protection. Together, these objectives demonstrate education leaders’ commitment to optimizing technology while prioritizing security and seamless integration.

If education executives could each wave a magic wand and instantly achieve their number one digital transformation goal or desired state for the year ahead, their top priorities would be:



Creating/improving digital learning platforms to improve learning



Providing enhanced cybersecurity



Incorporating AI tools for data analytics and teaching



Improving system integration/interoperability

The top three most urgent digital transformation initiatives include:

53%

Advancing education technology and e-learning platforms

50%

Facilitating interoperability and secure data sharing

48%

Strengthening cybersecurity measures and data protection

Charting a course from fragmentation to a unified strategy

For higher education institutions, the path to digital transformation is complex and ever-changing. Throughout the survey, two significant barriers emerged:

#1: Lack of a unified IT strategy

A critical obstacle, reported by 40% of respondents, is the absence of a unified IT strategy.

Nearly 9 out of 10 respondents indicated that decisions regarding digital initiatives are made by elected officials, executive-level decision-makers, university administrators, or department heads. However, priorities and approaches frequently change due to continuous election and appointment cycles.

Also of note: Only 9% of respondents report that decisions are made by IT or technology leadership. However, these individuals often play influential roles in guiding decision-makers.

Greater alignment and collaboration—across the organization and from outside experts—could aid education organizations in gaining momentum and continuity, even as leadership roles shift.

#2: Interoperability issues

A significant number of respondents (43%) also report interoperability issues.

This isn't surprising considering that two-thirds of education executives (67%) reveal that their team members require five or more applications or programs to gain a comprehensive view of their organization.

Overcoming this fragmented approach to technology will be critical, as it can impede the safe and efficient exchange of data and information.

How many applications or programs does your team require for a complete view of operations?

67%

Five or more

33%

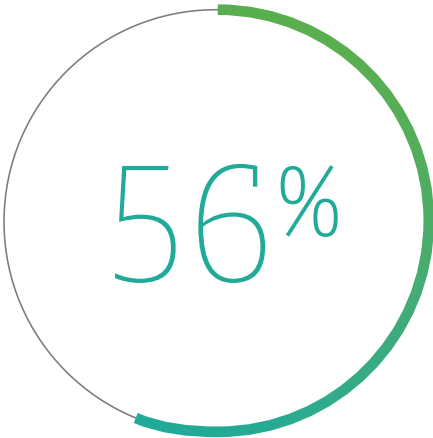
Three or more

0%

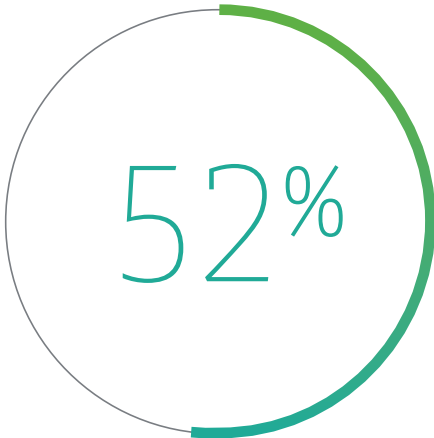
No one reports needing just 1 or 2 applications or programs

Adopting systems for digital transformation

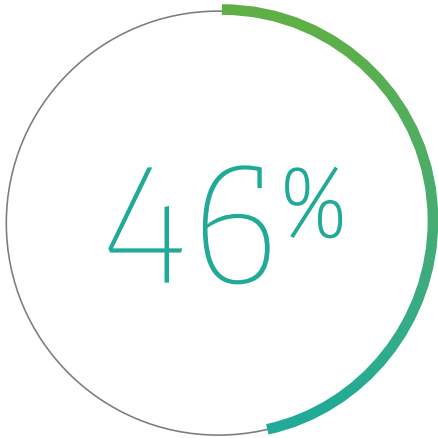
To address digital barriers in education, certain backend systems are gaining prominence. Half or more of education executives report that they are currently implementing:



Telecommunications



SASE model



Networking solutions

The surge in SASE adoption underscores its growing importance in an education organization's digital journey. SASE is viewed as a critical solution for various institutional needs, such as providing secure and reliable access to data and digital tools, enhancing the speed and quality of online experiences, and scaling to accommodate a growing number of users, devices and applications.

Furthermore, its unified platform simplifies network and security management while potentially reducing operational costs.

Education executives feel SASE is a path to:

76%



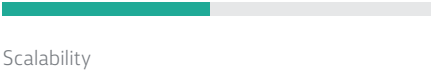
64%



65%



48%

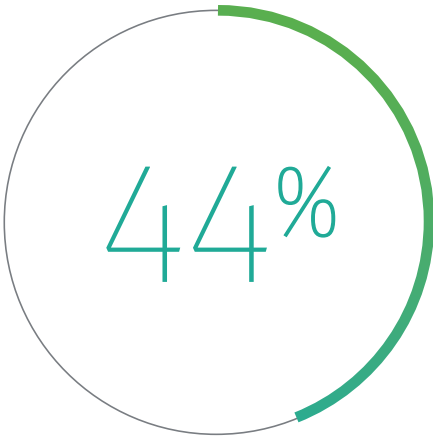


Vendor preferences diverge from other sectors

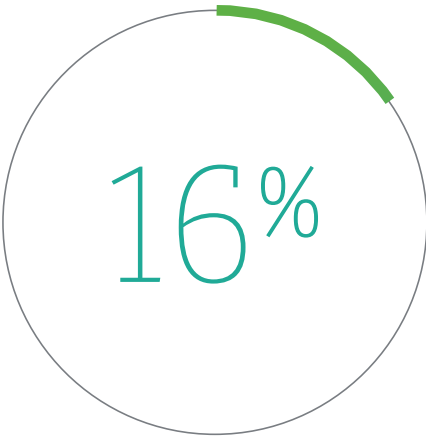
Unlike sectors in commerce, technology cost is not always a significant concern among education leaders. Instead, upfront investment is ranked among the lowest concerns at just 16%.

This is a stark difference compared to industries like manufacturing, where a survey by Windstream Enterprise found that 44% of manufacturing executives identified cost as the most critical factor in vendor selection.

Why does education differ so greatly? We find that higher education institutions often have access to healthy funding to facilitate necessary advancements. Instead of weighing decisions primarily on cost, the priority is more often placed on protecting the institution and mitigating risks.



of manufacturing executives identified cost as the most critical factor



of education leaders identified cost as the most critical factor

What matters most

Rather than cost, educational priorities point to protecting a higher-stakes environment. For example, connectivity issues could cause a sluggish response to a campus safety emergency—or poor interoperability could limit equitable access to optimal learning outcomes.

Therefore, when choosing technology vendors, education leaders say they make decisions primarily based on:

64%

Ease of implementation

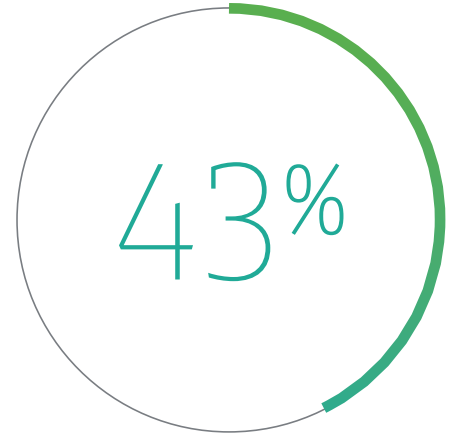
48%

Proven track record and references

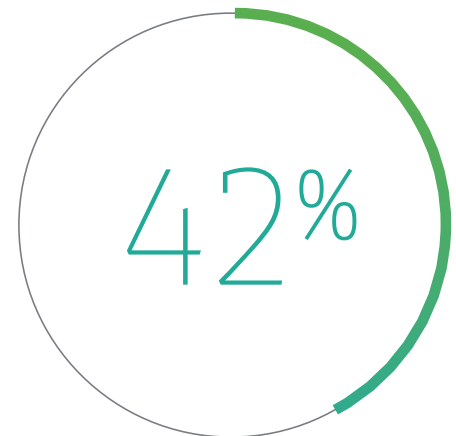
45%

Customer support and responsiveness

These priorities emphasize the importance in the education sector of getting it right from the start—and finding effective solutions (even at a higher cost) becomes imperative. Vendor stability, expertise and a proven track record are essential to guarantee a seamless and successful program implementation from start to finish.



Most higher education organizations manage their digital infrastructure and technology needs with internal resources, but nearly half (43%) still struggle to meet all their technology demands



of respondents have already adopted Managed Services to help them achieve their business goals and drive value

Conclusion

Higher education leaders feel the pressure to innovate rapidly while safeguarding vital infrastructure. They may not have a magic wand to overcome their unique challenges and risks—but the right support and expertise make all the difference.

Windstream Enterprise stands out as the ideal partner, offering proven cloud-based solutions delivered on a secure and reliable network. Moreover, our consultative approach assesses your solution needs holistically—not in product silos—to ensure your infrastructure works together seamlessly to advance your digital transformation goals.

Our managed connectivity, communications and security solutions are innovative. Your business outcomes are imperative.

To learn more about education, visit windstreamenterprise.com