

LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS · AIEA 2026 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The Next Two Years Are a Strategy Window

Leadership Insights from
the AIEA 2026 Annual Conference

A lot has changed in international education over the past year, and it does not look like things are slowing down.

Across campuses and global education organizations, leaders are navigating a more complex operating environment shaped by enrollment volatility, shifting student mobility patterns, visa and policy uncertainty, artificial intelligence, budget pressure, workforce demands, and rising expectations around student well-being. The decisions international education leaders make now will shape not only the next recruitment cycle or study abroad term, but the long-term role of global engagement within higher education.

At the AIEA 2026 Annual Conference, Via partnered with AIEA to host the first Leadership Insight Studio, a space for international education leaders to share what is top of mind. Leaders were asked one central question:

What is the one decision international education leaders need to get right in the next two years?

Their answers were practical, urgent, and forward looking. While each leader brought a different institutional lens, several themes emerged clearly: international education cannot retreat, it must prove its value, and it must become more deeply embedded in the core strategy of the institution.

Alongside the studio, Via and AIEA polled a sample of international education leaders through an anonymous Leadership Pulse Poll. Their answers back up what leaders said on camera, and sharpen it.

METHODOLOGY

23 Leader
interviews

62 Pulse Poll
responses

These findings are a snapshot of the sentiment of the international education leaders who took part — not a representative survey of the field. We share them to open a conversation, and we invite you to read each finding with one question in mind: do you agree?

A defining period for the field

International education is entering a defining period. The field is no longer operating from assumptions of predictable student mobility, stable recruitment markets, or broad institutional support. Leaders are being asked to make faster and sharper decisions about where to invest, what to stop doing, how to use data, and how to demonstrate impact.

The insights gathered through the Leadership Insight Studio point to six strategic priorities for the next two years:

01

Build more focused and resilient global portfolios.

02

Connect international education directly to career readiness and workforce development.

03

Use AI and technology intentionally, without losing the human center of global learning.

04

Prove the impact of international education inside the institution.

05

Center student well-being, belonging, equity, and reciprocity.

06

Embed internationalization as an institutional operating philosophy, not a standalone function.

The message from leaders was clear: this is not a moment to pause. It is a moment to decide.

Change is the new operating environment

International education leaders are facing pressure from multiple directions at once. Traditional inbound mobility patterns are shifting. Some institutions are seeing enrollment dips from historically strong markets. Visa, policy, and geopolitical uncertainty continue to affect student decision making. Students and families are asking harder questions about return on investment, career outcomes, safety, belonging, and affordability.

The pulse poll put numbers behind the pressure:

LEADERSHIP PULSE POLL

4 in 5

leaders named unpredictable government policy or shrinking budgets as the single greatest constraint on their global programs.

At the same time, AI is reshaping how students search for opportunities, how institutions communicate, how partnerships are formed, and how teams manage work. The technology conversation is no longer theoretical. It is already changing the field.

But the central challenge is not only technological or operational. It is strategic. International education leaders need to show why global engagement matters to students, institutions, employers, communities, and the future of higher education. They must make the value of the work visible to audiences that may not already understand it.

Institutions need smarter global portfolios

A recurring theme from the Leadership Insight Studio was the need to move away from scattered global activity and toward more intentional global portfolios.

A global portfolio includes recruitment markets, study abroad programs, transnational education, online delivery, offshore partnerships, microcredentials, research collaboration, and international student support. The question is not whether institutions should do all of these things. The question is which combination best supports the institution's mission, students, and long-term resilience.

For some institutions, this means diversifying recruitment markets to reduce risk. For others, it means exploring transnational education models that reach students where they are. Others may need to streamline education abroad options so programs align more clearly with curriculum, access, and career outcomes.

The strategic shift is simple but significant: international education leaders need to move from a long menu of activities to a focused portfolio of high-impact priorities.

Career value must be clear

International education has always helped students build skills that matter. Students gain adaptability, communication skills, intercultural fluency, confidence, problem solving ability, and the capacity to work across differences.

But leaders emphasized that these outcomes need to be translated more clearly into the language of employability and workforce readiness.



LEADERSHIP PULSE POLL

When asked which trend will most reshape their mobility strategy over the next 24 months, leaders' top answer was connecting mobility to workforce development and post-graduation pathways.

Global learning can no longer be positioned as an optional add-on. It needs to be understood as a core part of preparing students for life and work. That requires stronger alignment between international experiences, degree pathways, internships, employer needs, and career outcomes.

Institutions should be asking:

- Which global experiences support which academic programs?
- Which skills are students developing?
- How are those skills being documented?
- How do students explain those skills to employers?
- How can global learning become part of the institution's career value proposition?

The field already creates value. The next step is making that value easier to see, measure, and communicate.

AI should create capacity, not replace the human work

AI was one of the most urgent topics raised by leaders. The consensus was not that international education should avoid AI. Instead, leaders called for the field to understand AI, use it strategically, and secure a seat at the table as institutions make technology decisions.

AI can help reduce administrative friction, improve communication, support workflow automation, surface better data, and help students navigate complex choices. But it should not replace the relational, human-centered work that defines international education.



AI has already been an earthquake in the traditional classroom. It will shake the core of study abroad, too. We need to be ready.

AS ONE LEADER PUT IT IN THE POLL

In fact, the rise of AI may make international education even more important.

As technology becomes more embedded in work and learning, students will need the human skills that global experiences develop: empathy, judgment, cultural navigation, critical thinking, communication, and the ability to build relationships across differences.

International education can be the counterbalance to a technology-heavy world. The opportunity is to use AI to create more time and capacity for the work that only people can do.

Impact must be proven internally

Several leaders emphasized that international education offices need to advocate more clearly for their existence and impact on campus.

That means going beyond activity counts. Mobility numbers, enrollment data, partnership totals, and funding figures still matter. But they are not enough on their own.

The stronger story is what those activities produce.

Did a partnership lead to research funding, publications, patents, or new academic opportunities? Did a study abroad program help a student secure an internship or change their career path? Did international student support improve belonging, persistence, or alumni engagement? Did global engagement strengthen the institution's reputation, community impact, or workforce mission?

International education leaders need better evidence and better storytelling. They need to connect their work to the priorities presidents, provosts, deans, faculty, students, employers, and communities already care about.



MODERNIZATION PRIORITY

In the pulse poll, data and analytics ranked as the number one modernization priority — ahead of AI, partnership management, and student experience tools.

If the field does not define its impact, others may define it too narrowly.

Student well-being and belonging at the center of our mission

International education is personal. Students make major decisions that involve risk, investment, identity, family expectations, and uncertainty. Whether students are coming to campus from another country or leaving campus for a global experience, they need more than logistics.

They need care, preparation, protection, and belonging.

Leaders highlighted reciprocal and equitable engagement as a core priority. Partnerships should not be extractive. Programs should not be designed only around institutional convenience. Students should feel that they can participate, contribute, lead, and succeed in global environments.

This also means refusing to separate international education from diversity, equity, and inclusion. Global education is about access, belonging, representation, cultural understanding, and whose knowledge is valued. These are not separate conversations. They are connected parts of the same mission.

The question for institutions is not only, “Can students participate?” It is, “Can students thrive?”

Internationalization must be embedded in the institution

One of the strongest themes from the Leadership Insight Studio was that international education should not sit at the edge of institutional strategy.

It should be embedded into how institutions teach, recruit, partner, conduct research, support students, and prepare graduates.

When internationalization is treated as one department's responsibility, it becomes vulnerable. It can be misunderstood, underfunded, or seen as optional. But when internationalization becomes an institutional operating philosophy, it becomes part of the university's mission and value proposition.

This shift requires collaboration across academic affairs, enrollment management, student success, career services, research, advancement, and institutional leadership. It also requires international education leaders to translate their work in ways that resonate across campus.

Global engagement cannot be the cherry on top. It needs to be part of the core.

Strategic actions for the next two years

To respond to this moment, international education leaders should begin with a focused set of actions.

01

First, conduct a global portfolio review. Identify which programs, partnerships, markets, and initiatives are mission aligned, financially sustainable, and strategically important.

02

Second, connect global learning to career outcomes. Define the competencies students gain through international experiences and build clearer bridges to employability, internships, and workforce development.

03

Third, assess AI and technology use across the office. Look for opportunities to reduce manual work, improve student support, and generate better insights without weakening the human experience.

04

Fourth, build an internal impact narrative. Use data and storytelling to show how international education supports enrollment, retention, research, reputation, student success, and institutional mission.

05

Fifth, center student well-being. Review programs, policies, and support systems through the lens of belonging, access, care, reciprocity, and safety.

06

Finally, make internationalization everyone’s work. Build cross-campus alignment so global engagement is not isolated, but integrated into institutional strategy.

40%

MEDIOCRE AT BEST

Leaders voiced low confidence in their institution's current strategy, scoring it a 5 out of 10 or lower. This widespread doubt dragged the overall average down to barely above the midpoint.

There’s urgency behind this list. When leaders rated their confidence in their institution’s current strategy, the average was barely above the midpoint, and nearly four in ten rated it 5 out of 10 or lower. Leaders see what needs to happen. Fewer are sure their institution is set up to do it.

CONCLUSION

No retreat

The next two years are not a pause. They are a strategy window.

International education leaders are being asked to make decisions in a fast-changing environment, but the path forward is not retreat. It is focus.

The field needs to decide what it does best, prove why it matters, use technology wisely, center students, and embed global learning into the heart of higher education.

The insights from the AIEA 2026 Annual Conference point to both urgency and optimism. International education is changing quickly, but leaders across the field are already thinking boldly about what comes next.

No retreat. No autopilot. No waiting for the old model to return.

The work now is to build the next one.

With thanks to the Leadership Insight Studio contributors

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