emerging driving employability

digitalleaders Higher Education for AI & Tech Careers

DIGITAL LEADERS 2026
Higher Education for AI & Tech Careers
Methodology

How we built the Digital Leaders 2026 set of rankings

By following the early careers of thousands of alumni over time, Digital Leaders in higher education identifies the institutions that have **contributed most to developing the professionals driving today's AI & Tech economy.**

The rankings are the flagship publication of a **broader research and insights programme** exploring talent development, career pathways and institutional contribution across the global AI & Tech economy.

It starts from a simple idea: the best way to understand a school's impact is to **look at what its graduates go on to achieve.**

This approach answers **one straightforward question:**

Which institutions are producing the people shaping today's AI & Tech economy?

2026 at a glance:

213,732
Professional profile analysed

665,185
Degree records matched to institutions

5,000+
Higher education institutions referenced

Core data sources : coresignal.com, crunchbase.com, trendence.com, Pollup Data Services

Because AI & Tech careers are built through a combination of undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate education, the methodology considers **each institution's overall contribution to graduates' educational pathways.**

How the ranking has evolved

As AI & Tech careers evolve, so does the Digital Leaders methodology. From the beginning, the ranking has aimed to reflect **real-world effectiveness** through indicators combining **employer insights, institutional reach** and **measurable impact in the digital economy.**

The 2025 edition strengthened this approach by introducing **alumni career data**, allowing Digital Leaders to connect institutions more directly with the careers of their graduates.

The 2026 AI & Tech Careers Edition builds on this foundation by placing greater emphasis on **what graduates actually do and go on to achieve during their early careers,** while reducing the relative weight of employer perception and company performance indicators.

Ultimately, **careers speak for themselves.**

Three complementary pathways. Four complementary rankings.

The AI & Tech economy is built through three complementary forms of contribution: some professionals **build technologies**, some **create new businesses**. and some **help organisations transform**. Together, these three pathways capture the principal ways in which value is created across today's AI & Tech economy.

The Digital Leaders methodology is built around these pathways through **four complementary rankings.**

BEST IN COMPUTER SCIENCE
Software engineers, computer scientists and technology specialists who design, develop and deploy the digital technologies behind today's AI & Tech economy.

BEST IN DATA SCIENCE, AI & ADVANCED ANALYTICS
Data scientists, AI specialists, machine learning engineers and analytics professionals who develop intelligent systems and advanced data-driven solutions.

Together, the Computer Science and Data Science, AI & Advanced Analytics rankings capture the technology-building dimension of the AI & Tech economy.

BEST IN DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP
Graduates who found startups, launch products, scale innovation and create jobs.

BEST IN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION MANAGEMENT
Executives, managers, consultants and digital transformation leaders who drive technology adoption, innovation and organisational change within established **organisations.**

Together, these four rankings provide a comprehensive picture of how higher education institutions contribute to today's AI & Tech economy.

Following careers, not reputations

Many rankings begin with institutions. **We begin with people.**

Rather than starting with a predefined list of universities, Digital Leaders begins with the **labour market itself.** We identify the professionals shaping today's AI & Tech economy, trace them back to the **institutions where they studied**, and follow their early career trajectories over the **first ten years after graduation.**

This ten-year perspective allows us to observe how careers develop over time, from first jobs to leadership roles, entrepreneurship, professional mobility and the emergence of new AI & Tech careers.

Building the ranking involves **seven main steps.**

01.

Identifying the relevant career populations

We first identify the professional populations represented across the four Digital Leaders rankings, using **specific selection criteria for each ranking**. Examples of job titles, keywords and inclusion criteria are provided in Appendix A.

To ensure global balance, the number of profiles analysed in each country is guided by the **Network Readiness Index**, by Portulans Institute (networkreadinessindex.org) reflecting each country's level of digital development.

02.

Connecting graduates to institutions

Professional profiles often record institution names in different ways. We **standardise and reconcile these records** to ensure graduates are accurately linked to the institutions where they studied.

03.

Making the comparison fair

A university with 50,000 graduates will naturally produce more successful alumni than a university with 5,000 graduates.

To make institutions of different sizes comparable, **results are adjusted for institution size**, measuring talent development rather than graduate volume.

04.

Measuring institutional performance

We calculate each institution's score based on the number of graduates represented in the relevant professional populations, adjusted for institution size to **measure talent development rather than graduate volume.**

05. Ensuring stability over time

Exceptional performance should reflect a genuine trend rather than a one-year fluctuation.
The 2026 edition therefore applies a smoothing approach **combining results from the 2025 and 2026 editions.** This recognises consistently high-performing institutions while allowing outstanding new entrants to emerge.

06. Building the Global Digital Leaders ranking

Related institutions, such as a university and their affiliated business schools, are grouped before calculating the final institutional score.

Institution naming policy.
Digital Leaders applies a consistent institutional naming policy throughout the rankings to reflect the respective contribution of universities and their affiliated business schools. When the university is the principal contributor, its name is published first, followed by the affiliated business school in parentheses where both contribute meaningfully to the observed career outcomes. Conversely, when the affiliated business school is the principal contributor, its name is published first, followed by the university in parentheses.

The Global Digital Leaders ranking combines **four complementary rankings,** each contributing equally to the overall ranking (25%). Together, they represent the **full architecture of AI & Tech careers**, from building technologies and creating new businesses to transforming organisations.

07. Independent methodological review

The methodology, institutional matching and quality assurance procedures are independently reviewed by **Trendence Institute Gmbh** to ensure **methodological consistency, transparency and reproductibility.**

Digital Leaders platform of Rankings

The Global Top 150 is the flagship ranking of the Digital Leaders programme. It provides a global benchmark of the institutions with the strongest AI & Tech career outcomes.

Digital Leaders analyses more than 5,000 higher education institutions worldwide. The Top 150 highlights today's leading contributors, while additional publications provide increasingly detailed benchmarks by region, institution type and educational pathway.

The Digital Leaders programme includes:

- Global Top 150
- Next 50
- Regional rankings
- National rankings
- Business School rankings

On-campus and online education

The 2026 Global Digital Leaders ranking focuses on on-campus higher education. Separate rankings will be published for:

- Online Initial Education
- Online Executive Education, Lifelong Learning & Reskilling

Beyond the rankings

Alongside the rankings, research will be published throughout the year in **three complementary areas.**

AI & TECH PROFESSIONAL PATHWAYS

Career progression, leadership development, entrepreneurship, professional mobility and reskilling.

SKILLS INTELLIGENCE

The technical, AI, leadership and entrepreneurial skills associated with successful careers.

ECOSYSTEM INTELLIGENCE

The organisations, industries and innovation ecosystems where value is being created and graduates build their careers.

Data sources and partners

The Digital Leaders methodology combines **complementary data sources :**

Career data — Coresignal (coresignal.com)
Large-scale professional profile data are used to reconstruct graduates' early career trajectories over time.

Company intelligence — Coresignal & Crunchbase (crunchbase.com)
Company performance and innovation data help identify the organisations shaping today's AI & Tech economy and provide additional context for analysing graduate career outcomes.

Global benchmarking
The Network Readiness Index from Portulans Institute (networkreadinessindex.org) provides an internationally recognised framework for balancing the geographical distribution of professional profiles analysed across countries.

Independent methodological review
The methodology, institutional matching and quality assurance procedures are independently reviewed by Trendence.

*A detailed scientific methodology document **describing the complete methodology, data processing and analytical procedures** is available upon request.*

APPENDIX A:

Examples of eligible job titles , illustrative, not exhaustive, out of the 300 + in the data set :

- **AI & Engineering:** AI Specialist, Machine Learning Engineer, Computer Vision Engineer, Robotics Engineer, Full Stack Developer.
- **Data & Analytics:** Data Scientist, Data Engineer, Business Intelligence Consultant, Data Analyst.
- **Digital Transformation & Change:** Chief Digital Officer (CDiO), Digital Transformation Director, Transformation Director, Technology Consultant, Change Management Consultant, CTO, Director, Vice-President
- **Technology Leadership:** Chief Technology Officer (CTO), Chief Data Officer (CDO), Chief Information Officer (CIO), Chief Information Security Officer (CISO).
- **Innovation & Entrepreneurship:** Founder, Co-founder, Entrepreneur, Venture Capitalist.
- **Product & Strategy:** Product Manager, Innovation Manager, Strategy Consultant, User Experience Specialist.
- **Digital Marketing & Growth:** Marketing Automation Specialist, Growth Hacker, Technology Evangelist.
- **Finance & Investment:** Financial Analyst, Asset Manager, Investment Banking Analyst.