Britannica EDUCATION

Trust, Research Readiness, and Responsible AI Guidance:

What Higher Education Needs in a Changing Information Landscape

Survey research reveals how universities are navigating AI use, information literacy, student research preparedness, and growing pressure on library resources



Table of Contents

03 | Executive Summary

04 | Introduction: Higher Education's New Information Challenge

05 | Findings

1. Trust Has Become a Defining Requirement
2. Information Literacy Is Becoming a Core AI-Era Skill
3. Students Are Entering Research Environments Underprepared
4. Higher Education Needs a Bridge Between Foundational Learning and Scholarly Research
5. University Professionals Emphasize the Need for Clear AI Guidelines
6. Financial Pressure Is Raising the Standard for Resource Purchases
7. A New Higher Education Resource Model Is Emerging

12 | Implications

13 | Conclusion: In an Age of Unlimited Answers, Trusted Learning Matters Most

15 | Methodology and Limitations

Executive Summary

Artificial intelligence is rapidly changing how students find, interpret, and use information. Yet higher education institutions face a challenge that extends well beyond whether or how to adopt AI tools.

In August 2026, Britannica Education surveyed higher education professionals, drawing 361 responses across 48 countries. Taken together, the responses point to a fundamental concern: How can institutions help students navigate an increasingly complex information environment while providing trustworthy sources, strengthening research skills, and demonstrating the value of educational resources?

The findings reveal broad agreement around several priorities:

1. **Providing trusted and authoritative information remains paramount.**

   Ninety-five percent of respondents rated trusted and authoritative content as highly important when considering educational resources, making reliability the highest-rated resource attribute in the survey.

2. **Information literacy is becoming more—not less—important in the age of AI.**

   Eighty-one percent of respondents agreed that information literacy is more important today than it was five years ago. Yet only 14% expressed high confidence in students' ability to evaluate the reliability of information found online.

3. **Student research readiness remains a significant challenge.**

   Only 26% of respondents considered students very or extremely prepared for college-level research. The two most commonly identified challenges were overreliance on AI and difficulty with evaluating information.

4. **Higher education does not prioritize AI capability in a resource, but when AI exists it must include responsible usage guidance.**

   Only 52% of respondents rated AI-powered capabilities as a high-priority feature when they select educational resources, behind more important features such as trusted content, accessibility, and research support. However, when a resource does include AI tools, 81% said it was important that they be incorporated responsibly.

5. **Financial pressure is shaping purchasing decisions.**

   Nearly two-thirds of respondents identified rising resource costs as a current challenge, while only 21% expected their library budgets to increase during the next academic year. Cost-effectiveness was the most commonly cited factor influencing purchases when budgets are constrained.

As AI capabilities reshape the digital research landscape, higher education institutions recognize a growing need to strengthen students' research and information literacy skills while demonstrating the value of their technology investments.

© 2026 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Higher Education's New Information Challenge

The information environment surrounding today's university students looks dramatically different from the one that existed even five years ago.

Students can now generate answers, explanations, summaries, citations, essays, and research starting points almost instantaneously with generative AI. At the same time, they continue to navigate traditional search engines, scholarly databases, digital libraries, course materials, open educational resources, and a growing array of academic technologies.

Accessing information has never been easier, yet determining which information can be trusted may never have been more complicated. For colleges and universities, this creates a challenge that touches teaching, learning, libraries, academic integrity, technology strategy, research support, and institutional spending.

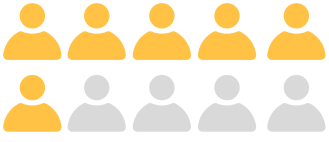
How prepared are students to operate in this environment? What skills do educators believe students need most? How can AI tools support learning? And as university budgets come under pressure, what qualities make an educational resource worth purchasing?

Britannica Education's global survey of higher education professionals explored these questions. Respondents represented institutions in 48 countries and a range of professional responsibilities, with particularly strong representation from librarians and information services professionals.

The findings reveal a sector undergoing technological change while confronting a familiar educational problem: Students need significant support learning how to find, evaluate, understand, and responsibly use information.

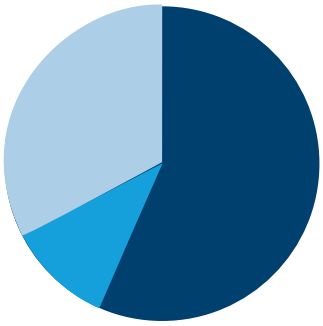
About the Survey

361
total responses



~6 in 10 respondents serve in library or information services functions.

Responses from 48 countries



Because participation was voluntary and did not use a probability-based sampling methodology, findings should be interpreted as descriptive of the respondents surveyed rather than as estimates for the entire global higher education population.

© 2026 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

1. Trust Has Become a Defining Requirement

Across the survey, one theme appears repeatedly: **Higher education professionals place an exceptionally high value on trustworthy information.**

Respondents were asked to rate potential attributes of educational resources on a five-point scale, where 1 was least important and 5 was very important. **Ninety-five percent rated trusted and authoritative content a 4 or 5**. This was the highest-rated characteristic, followed closely by accessibility and usability.

What Higher Education Professionals Value in an Educational Resource



- Information literacy support: **80%**
- Integration with campus tools: **74%**
- Faculty support materials: **70%**
- AI-powered capabilities: **52%**

The emphasis on trusted content was also evident when respondents were asked what matters when evaluating library resources. **Quality and authority of content was the most commonly selected factor, cited by 64% of respondents.**

Trustworthiness takes on additional significance in the context of generative AI. About **57% of respondents said they were very or extremely concerned about students relying on inaccurate or untrustworthy AI-generated content**. Information accuracy and trustworthiness was also selected by **73%** as an important institutional AI challenge, second only to academic integrity.

A consistent theme throughout the findings is the importance of credible, verified information. As AI tools become more integrated into academic research, the ability to evaluate sources and verify information remains essential. These results reinforce that **trust in information is a foundational priority, regardless of how technology evolves.**

Universities strive to provide learning environments where students can trace information to credible sources, distinguish evidence from assertion, understand where information originated, and evaluate whether it deserves their trust. The future of education content may therefore depend on provenance and authority rather than on speed, personalization, or automation.

© 2026 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

2. Information Literacy Is Becoming a Core AI-Era Skill

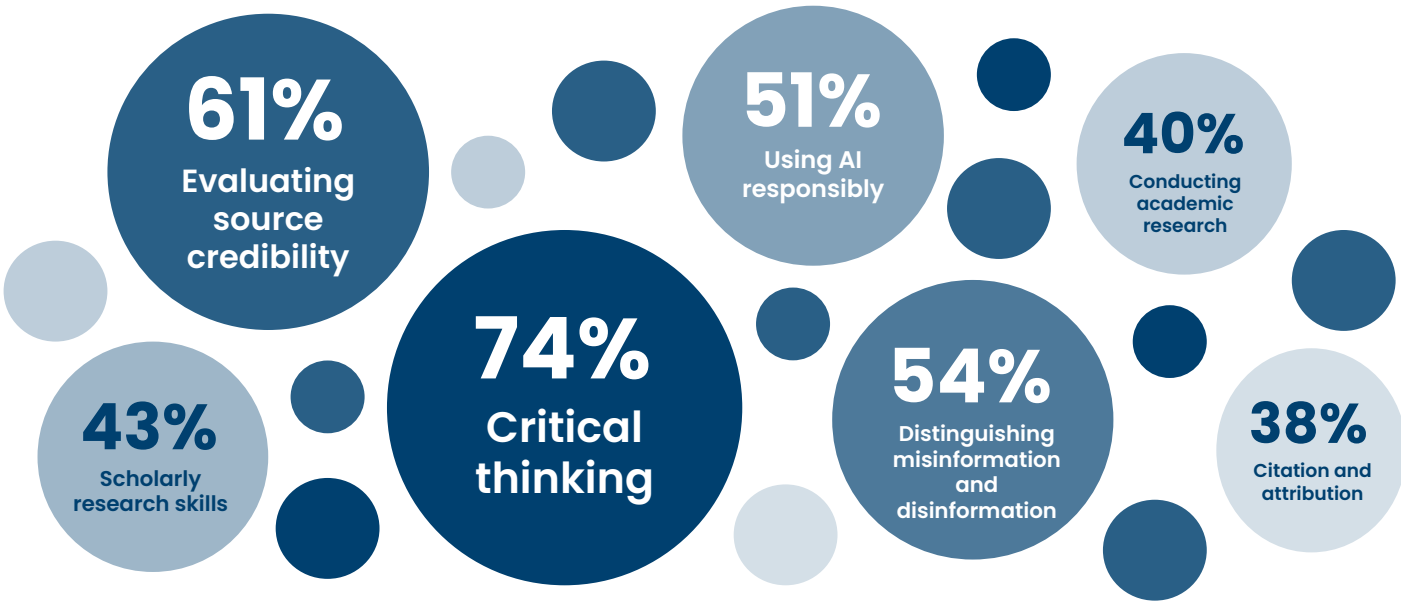
Survey respondents shared strong agreement that information literacy has grown in importance.

The skills that respondents prioritized tell an important story.



of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that developing information literacy skills is more important today than it was five years ago.

Most Important Information Literacy Skills



*Respondents were allowed to select more than one skill.

The top three priorities all relate to **judgment** rather than access. Students need to determine whether information is credible, recognize misleading information, and think critically about what they encounter.

However, higher education professionals appear to have limited confidence in students' current ability to do so. Only **14% of respondents said they were very or extremely confident that students can reliably evaluate information they find online.**

This represents one of the central tensions in the research: Educators increasingly consider information literacy essential, yet relatively few believe students have mastered it.



Generative AI usage may make that gap more consequential. When students can receive an immediate, fluent response to almost any question, information literacy shifts from primarily a research-library skill to a fundamental part of learning itself.

© 2026 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

3. Students Are Entering Research Environments Underprepared

Concerns about information literacy extend directly into academic research. **Only 26% of respondents described students at their institutions as very or extremely prepared for college-level research.** The majority described students as moderately, slightly, or not at all prepared.



of respondents described students as very prepared for college-level research.

When asked to identify students' greatest research challenges, respondents pointed to a combination of AI-usage behaviors and long-standing research difficulties.

Respondents ranked AI overreliance, evaluating information, and finding credible sources as students' top three research challenges. The combination of emerging AI-related concerns and long-standing information literacy challenges suggests that AI overreliance is closely connected to broader issues of research readiness.

A student who struggles to evaluate sources might be less equipped to evaluate an AI-generated response. A student who lacks foundational understanding may have difficulty recognizing when an AI system produces inaccurate information. A student unfamiliar with scholarly research may accept the answer available most quickly rather than seeking stronger evidence.

The survey findings therefore point toward an interconnected set of capabilities: **foundational knowledge, source evaluation, research literacy, critical thinking, and responsible AI use.**

Greatest Student Research Challenges

- **53%** Relying too heavily on AI tools
- **53%** Evaluating information
- **45%** Finding credible sources
- **42%** Understanding complex academic content
- **41%** Developing research questions
- **36%** Citation and attribution
- **31%** Consolidating information
- **29%** Using scholarly databases

*Respondents were allowed to select more than one challenge.



© 2026 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

4. Higher Education Needs a Bridge Between Foundational Learning and Scholarly Research

One of the strongest areas of consensus among survey respondents concerned the transition students must make from understanding a topic to researching it academically. **Eighty-four percent of respondents agreed that students benefit from trusted resources that bridge the gap between introductory learning and scholarly research.** Only 6% disagreed.

This result is especially significant when viewed alongside the research challenges respondents believe students are facing. Students may encounter scholarly literature before they have sufficient background knowledge to understand its terminology, context, or significance. Conversely, students who begin with general web searches or AI-generated explanations may struggle to move from basic understanding toward credible academic evidence.

When respondents were asked at what point in the research process students need the most support, **the most frequently selected stage was conducting scholarly research**, followed by using AI responsibly throughout the process and evaluating sources.

It is normal for students to feel caught between "I need to understand this topic more" and "I am ready to navigate specialized academic literature." Trusted introductory resources can play an important role in helping students establish initial lines of inquiry that lead into primary research.

In the AI era, this bridge may become even more important. Foundational understanding equips students with the knowledge they need to critically evaluate information, including AI-generated content, and engage in more **rigorous**, **independent academic research**.



© 2026 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

5. University Professionals Emphasize the Need for Clear AI Guidelines

Higher education institutions are clearly engaging with AI, but institutions' approaches to implementing and guiding use of AI tools is varied.

Among respondents:

- **24%** said their institution had started developing AI guidelines.
- **23%** were actively evaluating AI's role.
- **20%** reported having formal AI strategies and policies.
- **15%** said AI use remained largely at the discretion of individual instructors or departments.
- **12%** reported implementing AI tools broadly across teaching and learning.
- **6%** had not yet addressed AI institutionally.

This distribution shows a sector still establishing norms.

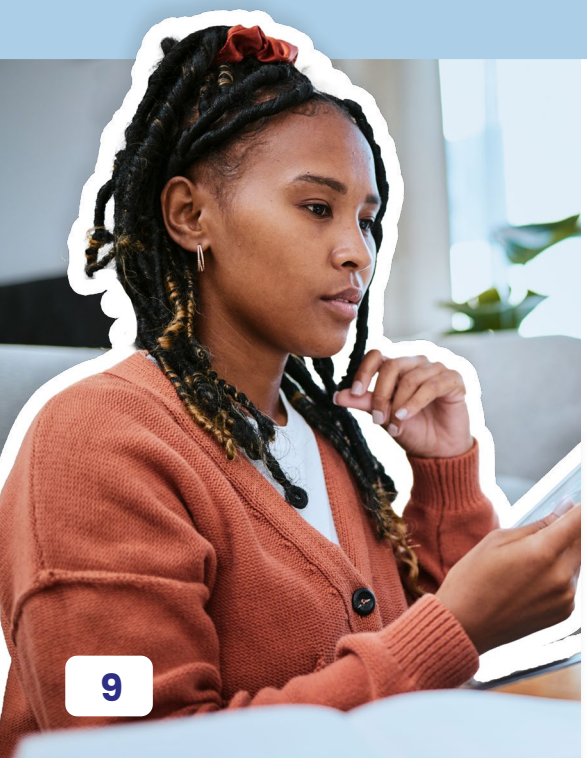
Against this backdrop, **81% of respondents said it was very or extremely important for educational resources to incorporate AI responsibly.**

The term ***responsibly*** is crucial.

Top AI-Related Challenges in Higher Education

- **78%** Academic integrity
- **67%** Student overreliance on AI
- **62%** Student AI literacy
- **42%** Faculty adoption and training
- **73%** Information accuracy and trustworthiness
- **64%** Responsible AI use
- **45%** Institutional AI policies

*Respondents were allowed to select more than one challenge.



These findings demonstrate that higher education's primary concerns about AI are questions of **integrity, judgment, accuracy, literacy, and governance.**

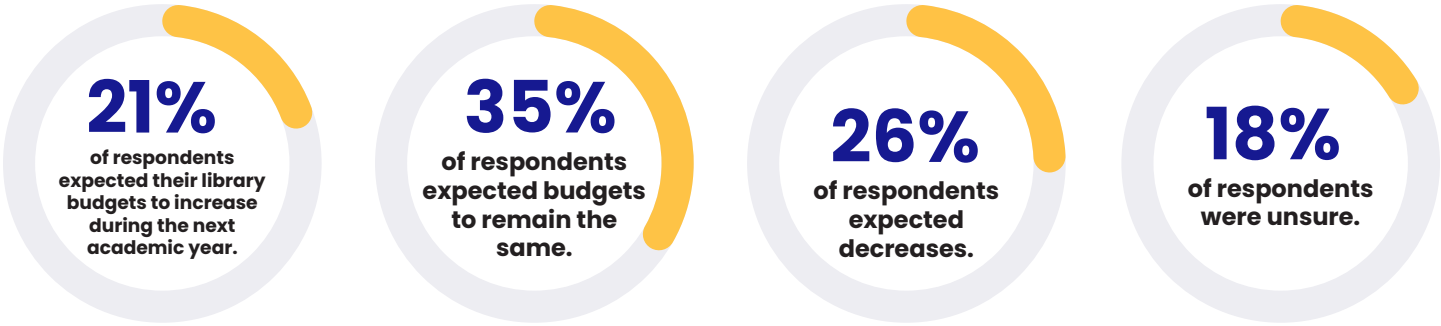
Higher education professionals prioritize those qualities when evaluating educational resources. Only 52% of respondents rated AI-powered capabilities as a high-priority feature in educational resources, behind features such as trusted content, accessibility, research support, or information literacy support. But when a resource includes AI tools, **81% said it was important that the AI be incorporated into students' work in a responsible way.**

The message is clear: **AI is most valuable to higher education when it strengthens established educational priorities rather than becoming the priority itself.** Higher education professionals value AI when it supports students as they think, research, evaluate, and learn responsibly.

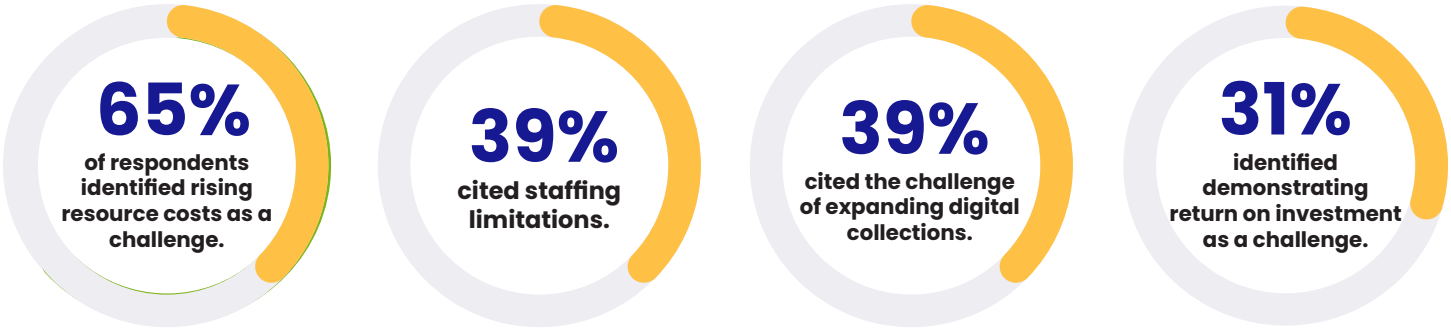
© 2026 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

6. Financial Pressure Is Raising the Standard for Resource Purchases

Both technology and financial pressures are influencing how higher education institutions make decisions about resources.



At the same time:



When budgets are constrained, **cost-effectiveness dominates factors influencing purchasing decisions.**

Influences on Purchasing When Budgets Are Constrained

Factor	Respondents Selecting It*
Cost-effectiveness	**73%**
Faculty demand	**55%**
Usage data	**44%**

*Respondents were allowed to select more than one factor.

Even when delivering high-quality content, resources increasingly must:

- **Justify their cost**
- **Serve multiple institutional priorities**
- **Achieve meaningful usage**

For library purchasers in particular, evidence of adoption and value becomes increasingly important as subscription and collection costs compete for limited funding.

© 2026 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

7. A New Higher Education Resource Model Is Emerging

Taken together, the findings suggest that universities may be moving toward a new definition of a high-value educational resource.

Historically, institutions might have evaluated resources primarily according to the breadth or depth of their content. Content remains critical, but respondents now appear to expect resources to perform several functions simultaneously. A high-value resource increasingly needs to be:

1. **Trustworthy**
   Students must be able to rely on the information they encounter and understand where it comes from.
2. **Accessible**
   Information must be usable by learners with diverse needs and straightforward to navigate.
3. **Research-enabling**
   Resources should help students progress from initial exploration toward credible academic inquiry.
4. **Information literacy–building**
   Students need opportunities to practice evaluating sources, questioning claims, understanding context, and using information ethically.
5. **AI-responsible**
   AI should support—not circumvent—critical thinking, research, and learning.
6. **Integrable**
   Resources must work within institutional teaching, learning, library, and technology environments.
7. **Demonstrably valuable**
   Institutions need evidence that resources are being used and contributing meaningfully to teaching, learning, or research.



These expectations cut across professional roles and point toward a future in which a “content resource,” “research tool,” and “AI-enabled learning platform” may become a singular information literacy resource.

© 2026 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Implications



Implications for University Leaders

The survey results suggest several considerations for institutional strategy.

First, AI strategy and information literacy strategy should be developed in tandem.

Many of the highest-ranked AI concerns—accuracy, overreliance, academic integrity, and responsible use—are fundamentally information literacy questions. Teaching students how to use AI responsibly may therefore require strengthening their ability to evaluate sources, verify claims, recognize uncertainty, understand evidence, and conduct research.

Second, institutions may need to strengthen the transition from general understanding to academic research.

Students cannot evaluate sophisticated information effectively if they lack sufficient foundational knowledge to understand it. Building that foundation is not a substitute for scholarly research but rather a pathway into it.

Third, university professionals should consider whether their technology investments support student thinking in addition to student productivity.

AI systems can make many tasks faster. The educational question is whether they also help students become more capable researchers, readers, writers, and thinkers.

Finally, financial pressures are prompting institutions to prioritize resources that address multiple needs and deliver value across teaching, learning, and research.

Institutions that connect resource investment to student research behaviors, faculty needs, usage, accessibility, and learning outcomes may be better positioned to make sustainable purchasing decisions.



Implications for Libraries

Libraries sit at the core of nearly every issue identified in this survey: librarians support the discovery of trusted information, foster the development of research skills, manage increasingly complex digital collections, and help institutions navigate questions of source credibility and academic integrity—all while facing significant budget pressure.

The survey suggests an opportunity for library staff to play a central role in institutional AI strategy as leaders in **information evaluation, responsible research, and AI literacy.**

Librarians are recognizing the growing importance of their digital purchases demonstrating value. Once they've found a high-quality resource, they're asking more questions:

- Will students and faculty use it?
- Does it solve more than one institutional need?
- Can we demonstrate its value?
- Does it strengthen rather than weaken students' research capabilities?

With tighter budgets, the answers to these questions will become more important as librarians seek to consolidate resources and focus on what matters most for student success.

© 2026 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Conclusion

In an Age of Unlimited Answers, Trusted Learning Matters Most

Generative AI is often described as a transformation in access to information. For higher education, however, the greater transformation may concern what students must learn to do **with** this access.

- When answers are abundant and easily accessible, greater responsibility is placed on students to evaluate those answers.
- When content can be generated instantly, it becomes more important to know where and how to find credible information.
- When research can be accelerated through AI, it is increasingly important that students understand the research process well enough to use those tools responsibly.

The findings from this survey consistently point toward three interconnected institutional priorities:

Trust. Research Readiness. Demonstrable Value.

Higher education professionals want authoritative resources. They want students to think critically, evaluate information, find credible evidence, and become stronger researchers. When AI is used, they want it to be incorporated responsibly rather than indiscriminately. And they need educational investments to justify their place in increasingly constrained budgets.

For universities, libraries, and educators, this presents both a challenge and an opportunity.

The resources that will persist will be those that best **help students understand which information deserves to be trusted, how to investigate further, and how to become capable researchers themselves.**



© 2026 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



Britannica Academic

Designed around the priorities highlighted in this research, Britannica Academic provides trusted, expert-reviewed content tailored to university students. Its verified articles, primary sources, accessibility tools, and responsible AI integration help strengthen students' research and information literacy skills—moving students from initial exploration to confident, credible academic research.

Learn more about Britannica Academic and how it can support your institution.

© 2026 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Methodology and Limitations

This research is based on 361 completed survey responses collected between August 6 and August 31, 2026.

Respondents represented 48 countries. Approximately 52% were based in the United States, meaning the survey included substantial international participation but should not be interpreted as geographically representative of global higher education.

The sample included professionals across higher education, with a strong concentration of librarians and information services professionals.

Multiple-response questions allowed participants to select more than one answer; percentages for those questions consequently total more than 100%.

The survey used a voluntary response sample rather than a probability sample. Results describe the perspectives of participating respondents and should not be generalized statistically to all higher education institutions.

Open-ended responses were reviewed for recurring themes, but qualitative findings should be regarded as exploratory rather than as formal qualitative coding.

Source: Higher Education General Survey, August 2026. *N* = 361.

Note: Survey response data were analyzed and summarized with the help of AI. Findings were verified against the survey results and refined by Britannica's marketing and editorial staff.

© 2026 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



Britannica Academic

When Curiosity Leads, Learning Follows.

britannicaeducation.com/britannica-academic



Britannica EDUCATION